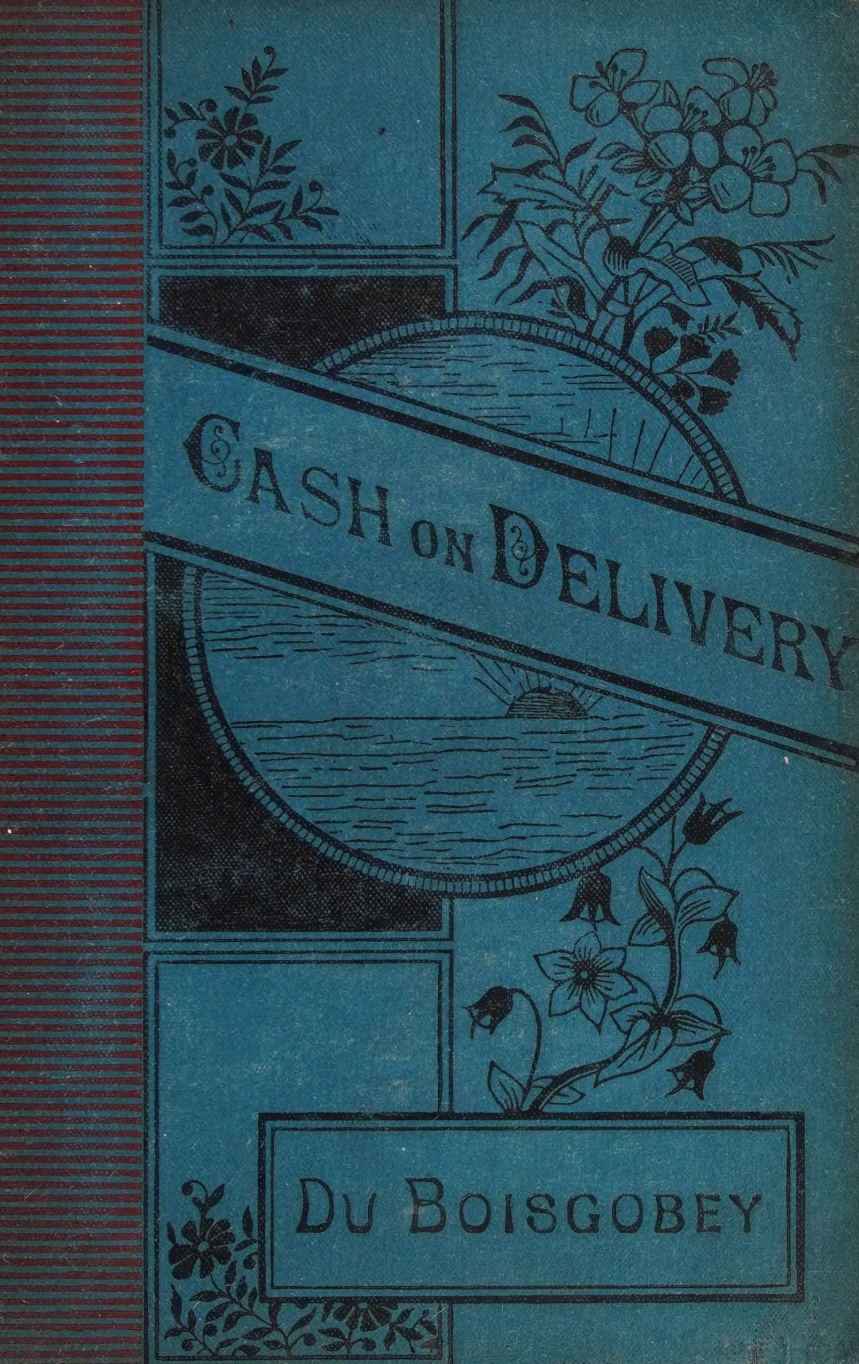
CASH ON DELIVERY
DU BOISGOBEY

2 Vols

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CASH ON DELIVERY

(RUBIS SUR L'ONGLE)

BY

FORTUNÉ DU BOISGOBEY

IN TWO VOLUMES—VOL. II.

AUTHORISED COPYRIGHT TRANSLATION

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CASH ON DELIVERY

CHAPTER V

Robert de Becherel was perfectly right in supposing that Mme. de Malvoisine and Mlle. Herminia had seen him as they were descending the steps to enter their carriage.

It was the hour for their daily drive, and the weather being superb, they were not inclined to miss the opportunity to show themselves to all Paris in the Champs Elysées. Women who do not belong to the fashionable world are always anxious to see all they can of it, and never renounce the hope of eventually securing an entrance into it.

This was certainly the case with the countess of the Rue du Rocher, for it was the object of her life to gain a foothold in those aristocratic circles into which a person can not secure admission merely by proving that he is the possessor of great wealth, whatever people may say to the contrary.

Richer persons than Mme. de Malvoisine have implored admission in vain, and her persistent efforts had not yet been rewarded.

She had succeeded in securing a seat beside some of the leaders of fashion at the theater, and at charitable entertainments, but she had never been invited to set foot in any aristocratic drawing-room, and her own was frequented only by fast men and women of no social standing.

This was not because her past was generally known, however. Very few persons were as familiar with that lady's antecedents as Colonel Mornac; but no one really believed that her title of countess was genuine, and not a few suspected that her pretended ward was her daughter. Still, no one doubted that Mlle. des Andrieux was an excellent match, for inquiries made of Mme. de Malvoisine's notary had satisfied suitors that the handsome Herminia would bring the husband of her choice a dowry of four hundred thousand francs, to say nothing of the magnificent fortune she was sure to inherit from a childless uncle.

And yet, Herminia seemed likely to die an old maid, though she might have married well, in spite of the stain upon her birth, and the mysterious origin of her adopted mother's fortune.

It was all her own fault, however. She was dreaming of a marriage that would open a different world to her; besides, she wanted her husband to please her. Mme. de Malvoisine, tired of waiting, would willingly have abated something of her pretensions, but Herminia was obstinate, and that day, on account of dissensions which had been revived by a recent disappointment, they were both in execrable humor.

Their handsome victoria, drawn by two superb blooded bays, and driven by a majestic coachman in rich livery, reached the main avenue of the Champs Elysées before its occupants had exchanged a dozen words.

They attracted a good deal of attention, and they had already received a number of bows, but not one that flattered them, for the gentlemen who saluted them were much better known at the Bourse than at the Jockey Club;

and the great ladies they met on this fashionable thoroughfare pretended not to see them.

Such isolation in the midst of this fashionable crowd was not calculated to restore Herminia's serenity, and her sullen air indicated that this *tête-à-tête* drive with the countess was not at all to her taste.

"You look out of sorts," remarked Mme. de Malvoisine. "What are you thinking about?"

"You wouldn't understand if I told you," retorted Mlle. des Andrieux, dryly.

"Tell me, all the same."

"I think I would like to change places with that flower-girl who is running after us in the hope of selling us a bouquet."

"Are you losing your senses?"

"No, I am in earnest. She is in rags, and probably will have no dinner to-night, but she is free to come and go as she pleases—and to love whom she pleases, and no one thinks of sneering at her."

"And who sneers at you?"

"Everybody, and not at me alone, but at both of us. Oh! don't feign astonishment. You are perfectly well aware of the fact. The Marquise de Charmière's landau just passed us."

"Well, what of it?"

"The other day, at the fair for the benefit of the Foundling Asylum, of which she was a patroness, you paid her two hundred francs for a pin-cushion, and she was lavish with her thanks. Ah, well! just now she turned her head, so as not to be obliged to recognize us as we passed."

"She did not see us."

"Yes, she did; but she did not want to bow to us in public. And look, here comes Claudine Rissler and Coralie de Barancos; see them laugh in our faces as they pass. Even such notorious women as these make merry at our expense."

"What is the matter with you?" asked her companion, evidently much annoyed. "Why are you so out of sorts to-day?"

"Because I am thoroughly tired of the life I lead," replied Herminia, promptly.

"I can't see that you have any reason to complain. I allow you to do as you like; in fact, your uncle often scolds me for letting you have your own way in everything; and if you are still unmarried, you have only yourself to blame. You are too hard to please."

"You think so; I think I am not. You have never introduced me to any one but *parvenues*. I want a gentleman for a husband, and I am going to have one."

"There was one at the house night before last, but you failed to make an impression. However, he is not worth regretting, a petty country squire that hasn't even a title to offer you. If you married him, you wouldn't even be a baroness."

"It's an easy matter to secure a title in Paris; besides, I don't care whether he has a title or not. I like him as he is."

"It remains to be seen if he likes you. I am inclined to doubt it. He had eyes only for Violette, and he must have seen her since I dismissed her, for I am satisfied that he was on his way to her house when we saw him just now."

"That is quite likely, but I intend to prevent him from going there again."

"You seem to be completely infatuated with the fellow."

"Yes," replied Mlle. des Andrieux, bluntly, "and I am determined that he shall marry me."

"I don't see how you are going to compel him to do it."

"You will see, however."

"I think it very strange that you haven't informed me of this decision before. I hope you will not carry things too far before consulting your uncle."

"My uncle! You know very well that he allows me to have my own way in everything. When will he return?"

"As soon as he finishes the business that called him to Marseilles. In two or three weeks, probably."

"I shall not wait for his return before ridding Monsieur de Becherel of that simpering Violette. Marcaudier will help me to do it."

"Marcaudier!" repeated the countess, in profound astonishment."

"Exactly. He is a man of infinite resources, and he will easily find a way to put an end to that affected creature's plotting and planning."

"What a strange idea! Marcaudier is devoted to us—to your uncle, especially—and he is a very shrewd fellow, but matters of this kind are rather out of his line."

"I have my reasons for consulting him, and at once. It is to his house that we are going now."

"What!"

"Yes, before getting into the carriage I told the coachman to drive to the Rue Mozart. It is four o'clock, and Marcaudier must have returned from the Bourse by this time, so we shall be sure to find him at home."

"What are you going to say to him?"

"You will hear. I shall say what I have to say in your presence."

Mme. de Malvoisine had long since discovered that it was useless to oppose Herminia, so she said no more. If Robert de Becherel could have heard this edifying conversation between the mother and daughter, he would not only have formed a more correct idea of the moral character of the ladies of the Rue du Rocher, but would also have realized more fully the dangers to which he had exposed himself by espousing Violette's cause.

It was to be a merciless war, a war to the death, that Herminia intended to wage upon her rival and indirectly upon him, and this unscrupulous woman was sure to find a

powerful auxiliary in the person of Cash on Delivery, who was the willing tool of the pretended uncle whose millions would some day descend to Herminia.

Robert would not have recoiled, most assuredly, but he would at least have been better prepared to enter upon this unequal struggle; but he was far from realizing the dangers that threatened poor Violette, for at that very moment he was congratulating himself upon having concluded a treaty of friendship with her.

Colonel de Mornac, who was less interested in the sentimental side of the question than his young friend, would certainly have studied with great curiosity the effects of the training this young girl had received.

Reared by a worthy *bourgoise*, Herminia would doubtless have turned out like other young ladies of that highly respectable class. She would not have dreamed of social distinction, and would probably have married some honest merchant, and made him a tolerably good wife.

But she had been taught from her earliest infancy to worship money. Her first gift had been gold coins, and though her supposed uncle lavished costly gifts upon her, he had never taken any pains to elevate her character or improve her mind, so it was not strange that the young girl soon became utterly spoiled. Accustomed from infancy to pay no attention to the advice of any one, her early years had been spent in tyrannizing over all around her—her mother as well as the servants. She entered the boarding-school at Saint Maude with a keen appreciation of her own beauty and her parent's wealth, but she had been an inmate of the institution only a short time before she began to understand her situation more clearly. She perceived that money was not everything, and that her birth closed against her doors that were open to much less liberally dowered girls, so she resolved to escape from her false position by means of a marriage that would insure her an *entrée* into the world of fashion, for she utterly

failed to understand that such a marriage would lower the social standing of the man who made it without improving that of the woman.

Consequently nothing would satisfy Herminia but a young man of ancient and honorable lineage, and suitors of this class did not frequent the drawing-room on the Rue du Rocher. Robert de Becherel had come there one evening by the merest chance; his name pleased her, and she thought him charming, so she instantly resolved that he should marry her; but the idea of first making sure of Robert's consent never once occurred to her, for she did not suppose for a moment that any comparatively poor young man would refuse a large fortune, especially when it was accompanied with the hand of a handsome young lady.

The only obstacle, therefore, in her opinion, was Violette, and she felt sure of her ability to get her out of the way with the aid of the crafty Marcaudier, who was always ready to oblige her, provided it suited his interest to do so.

Even if M. de Becherel had taken a fancy to the musician, he would soon get over it. A few slanderous reports would probably be all that was needed to alienate him from her; but if these failed she would have to resort to stronger measures. She would reduce her rival to poverty by preventing her from earning a living, and then send to her some rich gentleman who would have no difficulty in enticing her from the path of virtue by promising her a comfortable maintenance. Robert, deserted for the sake of this wealthy capitalist, would become thoroughly disgusted with his former divinity, and it would only be necessary to get him embarrassed financially to make him ready and willing to marry an heiress.

It would be a compulsory marriage, it is true; but that mattered little to Herminia, provided she would have a right to call herself Mme. de Becherel. She would win her husband's love afterward—after the wedding.

Animated by these laudable intentions, and resolved to shrink from nothing to accomplish her object, she could not apply to a better person than Marcaudier. The countess had no voice in the matter, but it was necessary to consult the pretended uncle, and Marcaudier was the only person who had any influence over the person who held Herminia's financial destiny in his hands.

In the meantime, the two spirited bays had traversed the Avenue Eylau, and were already descending the rather steep Rue Mozart.

"I knew we should find him at home," said Herminia, at last breaking a silence that was beginning to alarm Mme. de Malvoisine. "Don't you see him there on the balcony, smoking a cigar?"

"Yes, but he is not alone."

"No. It is Julia Pannetier of the Fantasies Lyriques, who is with him. She has been living with him for more than a year. He will send her away, however. He is under too many obligations to uncle to refuse to see us."

"Your uncle is also under obligations to him," muttered Mme. de Malvoisine.

Herminia did not contradict this assertion. The victoria had just paused in front of the house, and Marcaudier was already on hand to assist his guests to alight.

"How do you do?" said Herminia, unceremoniously. "It was I who persuaded mamma to come to see you, for I wished to consult you on a very important matter."

"I was expecting you," replied the usurer, smiling. "Won't you come in?"

Their host ushered them into a drawing-room that opened upon the balcony and that commanded a view of the upper part of the Rue Mozart.

"What lucky wind blew you here, my dear madame?" he asked.

This question was addressed to Mme. de Malvoisine, who growled in reply:

"Herminia will tell you. I know nothing at all about it."

"I came to consult you upon a purely personal matter," said Mlle. des Andrieux, "and to ask your assistance."

"I shall be only too happy to serve you. What do you wish to consult me about?"

"About my marriage."

"I thought as much. Gustave Piton told me all about it. I have seen the young man."

"Monsieur de Becherel?"

"Yes. He has done me the honor to borrow ten thousand francs of me."

"What do you think of him?"

"I think he would suit you admirably, but he doesn't seem inclined to marry at present."

"I want to induce him to change his mind."

"That will not be a very easy matter, I think, but we can try. The moment is propitious, certainly. In debt to me, and dismissed by Labitte, whose private secretary he was, he probably hasn't a penny at his disposal."

"And yet you say that he would suit my daughter!" exclaimed the countess, indignantly. "We are not particular about a large fortune, it is true, but we don't want a pauper in the family."

"Pardon me, this gentleman is not a pauper by any means. I have made inquiries about him, and he has a very nice estate in Brittany, and belongs to one of the oldest and most highly respected families in his native province. His wife would be received anywhere—even in the Faubourg Saint Germain."

"That is all very fine," replied Mme. de Malvoisine, angrily, "but do you dare to assert that Herminia's uncle would approve this match?"

"I feel sure that Leon would not oppose it, particularly if he knew that Monsieur de Becherel pleased his niece,"

replied Marcaudier. "What are you laughing at, mademoiselle?"

"I always laugh when I hear you call my uncle Leon," answered Herminia. "It is all very well for children and young people to call each other by their Christian names, but it certainly does sound absurd in grown people."

"It is all a matter of habit, mademoiselle," replied Marcaudier. "Your uncle and I were together at an age and under circumstances when people are not likely to stand on ceremony, so he continues to call me Pierre, and I to call him Leon precisely as in the days when I was mate on board his brig, the 'Vulture.'"

"Have you heard from him?" inquired the countess.

"I received a letter from him this morning. He is well, and will return in about a fortnight. He spoke of mademoiselle in his letter, and expressed a wish to see her married this year. He says he is growing old, and has not time to wait."

"So my resolve to marry Monsieur de Becherel is an eminently sensible one," remarked Herminia.

"I think so, and I will do my best to bring the gentleman to your feet. I have a plan. Will you give me *carte blanche* to execute it?"

"Willingly."

"Then be kind enough to listen to me. In the first place, this young man is in my power to some extent, at least, by reason of a note that he has given to me, and that I can present for payment to-morrow, if I choose, for he signed it before it was filled out. He would not be able to pay it, for he supposes that it will not become due for three months, and it would take him some time to raise the money by means of a mortgage. I could give him a good deal of trouble, if I chose, you see, but I don't know that we should gain anything by it."

"On the contrary, it would only incense him against me, if he ever found out that you were a friend of mine."

"He knows that already, for I spoke to him about you when he called to see me on the Rue Rodier."

"What did he say about me?"

"Nothing. He didn't seem inclined to commit himself in any way, and he appeared to hold marriage in holy horror. Yes, I think it will be best for me to abandon all idea of demanding the immediate payment of the note. He would find the money to pay me. His mother would give it to him; besides, he has other friends who would accommodate him—among them, one with whom we shall have to contend some time or other—a certain Colonel Mornac."

"Colonel Mornac!" exclaimed the countess. "He is a very honorable gentleman, and I consider that he honors my salon whenever he condescends to enter it."

"I do not deny that, madame, but we shall have a dangerous enemy in him, nevertheless. I have already discovered that he is giving Monsieur de Becherel bad advice. Piton, whom I met this morning, tells me that the old soldier has urged his protégé to break off all connection with him, Piton—who is an old comrade by the way—and Becherel has done it. That doesn't matter, however. The great trouble is that the young man doesn't want to marry you, because he is in love with somebody else."

"You have discovered that!" cried Mlle. des Andrieux. "Marcandier, you are certainly a remarkably clever man."

"No: I am a man who merely takes the trouble to reason, and to act upon the conclusion of his reasoning. The unsophisticated youth fell in love with your musician at first sight; so the first thing to be done is to break off a dangerous intimacy that has scarcely begun."

"I have turned the hussy out of my house," said Mme. de Malvoisine.

"And you made a great mistake in doing so, in my opinion. By keeping her you would have been able to hold her

in check, while out of your house she is free from your surveillance."

"Not so free as you suppose. It was I who rented and furnished the rooms she occupies on the Rue de Constantinople. I even paid the rent for a year in advance."

"This unfortunate generosity on your part does not give you the right to exercise any control over the young lady, however."

"Possibly not; but if I want the owner to give Mademoiselle Violette notice to leave I shall only have to say a word to the *concierge*."

"That would do no good, however. She could easily find other lodgings where Monsieur de Becherel would continue to visit her. There is only one way to alienate him from her, and that is to bring forward a rival—not a youthful rival, whose attentions would only increase Becherel's passion, but a protector who is able and willing to lavish every luxury upon the fair *pianiste*."

"The same idea has occurred to me," said Mlle. des Andrieux, smiling.

"Indeed! Well, we have this generous protector ready to our hand, and he will play his part to perfection, for he is really very much in love with the girl."

"You mean Galimas, I suppose?"

"Yes, he was talking about her to-day at the Bourse, where, by the way, he made at least three times as much as he lost yesterday, so he won't hesitate to spend several thousand louis to gratify his fancy; and however conscientious your former companion may be, I don't think she will turn a deaf ear to a man who is willing to place her at the head of an establishment costing one hundred thousand francs, though Violette sets a high value on herself, and she is right, for she is certainly very charming; besides, she will be worth more than twice as much a fortnight hence."

"What do you mean? Has she come into a fortune or

won the capital prize in some lottery?" asked Herminia, who was always thinking of money.

"No; but she is about to go on the stage; and as actresses are all the rage nowadays, Galimas will be willing to commit any folly for her sake when he sees her admired and applauded by the crowd."

"You certainly are not trying to make me believe that she has secured an engagement since day before yesterday?"

"It is a fact, nevertheless."

"Where?"

"At the Fantasies Lyriques."

"As a ballet-girl, then?"

"As the leading singer. She has a superb voice, you know."

Herminia bit her lip, and Mme. de Malvoisine, who seemed no better pleased than her daughter, said, dryly:

"She sings tolerably well; but where did the fool that engaged her hear her sing?"

"It's quite a long story. Colonel Mornac interested himself in the young lady's behalf at the request of Monsieur de Becherel, and as the manager of the Fantasies Lyriques—a man by the name of Cochard—would have been obliged to go into bankruptcy last year if the colonel hadn't loaned him a hundred thousand francs, it is needless to say that Monsieur de Mornac had very little difficulty in securing a hearing for any protégée of his."

"And the idiot expects Violette to retrieve the fortunes of his theater?" said Herminia, scornfully.

"He feels so confident of it that she is going to make her *début* in two weeks. He is staking his last card upon this *début*. He told me so himself this very morning when he called to pay some money that he owed me. He forgot that he has another account to settle with me, for he will have to pay dearly some day or other for having offended me by—"

"By dismissing your fair friend Julia Pannetier," interrupted Mlle. des Andrieux, with a merry laugh. She was delighted to learn that Marcaudier had a personal grievance against the manager who had just engaged Violette, for she felt sure that she would now have a zealous auxiliary, as they would both be equally interested in preventing Violette from succeeding in her new career.

"It is useless to try and conceal anything from you, mademoiselle," replied Cash on Delivery, smiling. "I have known Julia Pannetier a long time. I am deeply attached to her; and she has been set aside in order to make room for Mademoiselle Violette."

"How shameful!" exclaimed Herminia. "For a true *artiste* like Julia to be compelled to give place to a mere novice is an outrage; and I hope that Violette will fail as she deserves."

"I shall do my best to insure her failure, I assure you, and so will Julia. Everybody at the theater sides with Julia—the leader of the orchestra, the composer—everybody except Cochard. We have already made our preparations for the first performance. I shall have nearly a hundred men stationed in different parts of the house to hiss the *débutante*; and I have made a bargain with the leader of the claque by which it is agreed that his men are to applaud in the wrong places so as to annoy the other spectators. I will spend ten thousand francs, if necessary, to prevent the piece from being played through to the end. Julia knows all the ins and outs much better than I do, and she can tell you that Mademoiselle Violette is sure to be hissed off the stage, even if she possessed the talent of a Patti. A manager can impose a *prima-donna* on the public, but not upon other *artistes*, and all connected with the Fantasies will be leagued together against her, if only to please Julia, their former companion."

"I do not wonder!" cried Mlle. des Andrieux, "for Julia is charming. She sings to perfection, and dresses it

such exquisite taste that I never see her without longing to ask the address of her *modiste*. Why do you not introduce her to us?"

"Because—it would not be proper, mademoiselle," replied Cash on Delivery, gravely.

"Herminia!" exclaimed the countess, with an air of outraged propriety highly ludicrous under the circumstances.

"And why not?" demanded Mlle. des Andrieux, not in the least abashed. "A dramatic *artiste* is certainly as good as the divorced women and grass widows that frequent your salon."

Then turning to Marcaudier, she added:

"This is an excellent opportunity. Julia is here. She was with you a moment ago on the balcony. Won't you call her?"

Marcaudier, though he agreed with Herminia perfectly, hesitated, for fear of offending the countess; but the question was settled by Julia herself, who having taken refuge in the boudoir adjoining the drawing-room, had of course heard every word of the conversation.

Timidity was not one of her failings, and thinking she might venture to show herself she pulled aside the *portière*, and putting her head into the room, she cried, archly:

"May I come in?"

Herminia ran to her, took her by the hand and led her to Mme. de Malvoisine, who was choking with anger.

This fourth-rate diva was really a very pretty girl—a brunette with a clear, colorless complexion, red lips, and large black eyes. She had the confident air and cold smile of a woman who is in the habit of exhibiting herself in public: and it was without the slightest sign of embarrassment that she said to Herminia:

"I thank you, mademoiselle, for your good opinion of me, and for all the harm you wish my rival. Pierre was just telling me that Cochard had engaged her to fill my

rôles. She will not hold them long. Between us we will soon drive her off the stage."

Mme. de Malvoisine rose with an air of offended dignity, and stepped out upon the balcony through the open glass door. Marcaudier hastened after her in the hope of appeasing her wrath, and Julia was left alone with Uncle Leon's heiress.

"You must excuse her, she is full of prejudices," said Herminia, referring to her mother. "I haven't any myself, and will gladly be your friend if you will let me."

"I should be delighted. I like you already almost as well as if we had played together; besides, we are united in our hatred of that horrid Violette. You shall never regret having taken me into your confidence, I promise you that; and as I have had more experience than you have I may be able to give you some useful advice occasionally."

"Even if it is only on the subject of dress," laughed Herminia.

"You look very nice as you are. My style of dress wouldn't suit you. It is too loud. I am obliged to make myself conspicuous to please Marcaudier. He wants everybody to turn round and look at me when I drive in the Bois in his coupé. I serve as a sort of advertisement of his wealth, you see. Men are such fools!"

"All men are not."

"Fortunately! I have never seen Monsieur de Becherel, but I am sure that he is charming. In the first place he is young, and I hate old men."

"Marcaudier isn't old."

"Oh, no; and, of course I was very fortunate to meet him at the beginning of my career. It is so hard to make a start in life when one is poor. You who are in a position to choose, should marry only the man you love."

"That is what I am determined to do; but that creature is trying her best to take him from me."

"She will not succeed. After the downfall we are pre-

paring for her he'll never want to set eyes on her again.''

"But will she fail? She has a superb voice, there's no denying it."

"I don't care how much talent a *débutante* has, she can't contend successfully with actors and actresses who are leagued together to insure her defeat. We have only one person to fear—Colonel Mornac—and as I live I do believe that is he coming down the street now."

It was indeed Colonel Mornac who was riding down the Rue Mozart on a chestnut horse which he had just purchased, and which certainly did honor to his knowledge of horseflesh.

Robert had left the colonel entertaining a visitor on the Rue de la Boëtie; but that gentleman had subsequently taken advantage of the superb weather to try his new purchase, and after riding in the Bois for an hour or two, was now returning to Paris by way of Auteuil.

So it was the merest chance that had brought him to the Rue Mozart where he little expected to see Mme. de Malvoisine, but he had excellent eyesight, and he recognized her while he was still some distance from her, talking on the balcony in front of a handsome private house with a gentleman he did not know.

He was not particularly surprised to see the lady so far from the Rue du Rocher, but being in rather a lively humor he decided to allow himself the mischievous pleasure of interviewing her in order to find out what she was doing there. Mme. de Malvoisine had not the same reasons for disliking M. de Mornac that her daughter had. On the contrary, she thought him a charming man, and greatly admired his lofty stature and martial air, so she did not leave the terrace on his approach, but on the contrary leaned smilingly over the balustrade to greet him.

Marcaudier knew the colonel, from having seen him at the theater, and was not sorry to have an opportunity to

talk with Violette's defender and find out what kind of a person the *débutante's* enemies would have to contend with.

"Good-afternoon, my dear madame," began the colonel. "I did not expect to have the pleasure of meeting you to-day."

"I came here to call on an old friend," said the countess, glancing at Marcaudier, who bowed without speaking. "But why have you so unkindly deserted us?" she continued, reproachfully. "Madame de Carantoir was deploring your absence again last evening."

Mme. de Carantoir was the widow into whose good graces the colonel was trying to ingratiate himself.

"Ah, madame, one can not always go where one would like to go," the gentleman replied, gallantly. "I was obliged to spend last evening with some stupid old fossils who nearly bored me to death. I would greatly have preferred to be surrounded by fresh young faces—"

"Like that of Mademoiselle Violette."

"Like that of Mademoiselle des Andrieux," continued the colonel, without noticing the interruption. "How is she? I haven't seen her for three days, and I am really pining for a look at her."

"Indeed, sir?" said a voice that came from the open window, and almost at the same instant, the cameo-like profile and massive shoulders of the fair Herminia appeared behind her mother.

"I had no idea that you took such a deep interest in me," continued that imposing young lady, ironically; "but as you have been kind enough to inquire about me, I can, in my turn, take the liberty of asking what has become of the young lady who bears the name of a flower. You know who I mean."

"I haven't the slightest idea," replied the colonel, with unblushing effrontery.

"Ask Monsieur de Becherel. He hasn't forgotten *la belle* Violette. Ah! you recollect now!"

"Perfectly, mademoiselle. But I haven't met the person of whom you speak since the last evening I spent at Madame de Malvoisine's."

"But you can hardly be ignorant that she is about to make her *début* at the Fantasies Lyriques, as it was you who recommended her to the manager."

"So he engaged her this morning? How delighted I am to hear it! I wish her all the success she deserves!"

"And I hope she will fail ignominiously, if only to punish her for usurping the place of one who is not only a talented *artiste*, but also my friend."

"I was not aware that you had any friends on the boards," replied M. de Mornac, calmly.

"Yes: I have one. Come out, my dear Julia, and allow me to present to you the patron and protector of the creature who has usurped your place."

Mlle. Pannetier, who had up to this time kept herself in the background, now came forward, with a smile upon her lips, very much as she would have responded to an *encore*, and began to stare at the colonel with rare impudence.

Mme. de Malvoisine, crimson with anger and shame, could hardly refrain from boxing the ears of the daughter who seemed to take so much pleasure in compromising herself: and Marcaudier was fairly boiling with rage at Herminina's imprudence in thus proclaiming herself Violette's enemy, for she might just as well have warned M. de Mornac then and there that they were plotting to ruin his protégée's future.

The only absurdity left for this simpleton to commit was to involve him in the quarrel, and this she immediately proceeded to do.

"Come, defend your friend!" she exclaimed, turning to the usurer. "Tell Monsieur de Mornac that you are deeply attached to Julia, and that you will not permit that fool of a manager to sacrifice her to an insignificant music-teacher."

This unexpected announcement completed the colonel's enlightenment, and he began to bestow more attention upon Marcaudier, who did not seem at all inclined to obey the injunctions of Mlle. des Andrieux, however.

Herminia once started, there was no such thing as stopping her.

"Tell him, too," she continued, "that Monsieur de Becherel is in your debt, and that you can give him no end of trouble if you choose, and that you will not deprive yourself of this satisfaction if our dear Julia is compelled to give place to a mere street-singer. It shall be peace or war, as he pleases."

Marcaudier devoutly wished that the earth would open and swallow him, but he did not open his lips, though he was resolved to give the imprudent girl a piece of his mind as soon as the colonel left; and the colonel did not compel him to wait long, for he now knew all that he wanted to know in regard to their projects.

"I must not keep you out in the open air too long, my dear madame," he remarked to the countess. "I fear you will take cold, so you must allow me to take leave of you."

And without waiting for any reply, he trotted briskly away with the intention of immediately warning Robert of the conspiracy that had been formed against his fair friend.

On reaching the door of his young friend's apartments on the Boulevard Poissonnière, he was admitted by Robert's groom, who recognized him from having seen him at Mme. de Becherel's house at Rennes, and immediately ushered him into the smoking-room, where he found Robert engaged in reading a letter.

"You here, colonel!" exclaimed Robert. "I am very glad to see you."

"You haven't that appearance, for you are certainly weeping. What! at your age! You are certainly nothing more nor less than a big baby!"

"No, colonel, I assure you. It is this letter. Read it, colonel."

"I will, and I am going to read it aloud."

And M. de Mornac began in a firm voice:

"Robert, my beloved, my only son, my heart is filled with profound grief by the knowledge of the grievous fault you have committed. I thank you, however, for not having concealed it from me, for it would have been still harder to learn the cruel truth through Monsieur Labitte alone. Your letter, fortunately, reached me at the same time that his did.

"I will not reproach you. You have, I am sure, suffered enough already. Do not grieve over the loss of the money. I will procure the amount, and send it to you in a few days.

"The money is nothing: honor is everything, and I trust you have not lost that. But I entreat you to spare me further grief and anxiety. I have suffered so much in the past that I beseech you to take pity on me in my old age, and as you are not proof against the temptations of Parisian life, return to me. You will be welcomed like the prodigal son in the Scriptures.

"We will live together, and not be separated from each other again until the day God summons me to Him, and you will not think with regret of the empty pleasures and frivolities of the wicked city that lured my son from me. I know that at your age, I can hardly expect you to be content with the quiet life I lead in Rennes; but I know a charming young girl who loves you, and who is ready to marry you. She will make you happy; she will bear you beautiful children that we will rear together, and bring you a magnificent fortune that will enable you to gratify the expensive tastes you inherited from your poor father.

"Write me that you consent, and come as soon as pos-

sible. Your betrothed is awaiting you. You can guess to whom I refer."

"Can you?" asked M. de Mornac.

"Yes," stammered Robert. "She refers to a young lady I met last summer."

"But you are in love with Mademoiselle Violette. We will speak of that presently, however. Let me finish the letter first.

"If you refuse, if you turn a deaf ear to my entreaties, I warn you, my dear child, that I shall not hesitate. I shall come to Paris. There is certainly a place for me in the little flat I took so much pleasure in furnishing for you. You will give me a cordial welcome, will you not? and let me pet and spoil you as in the days of your childhood? But you will not compel me to make such a complete change in all my habits, I am sure. I await your reply with confidence. I understand, of course, that you can not leave on the instant. Take your time, my son, but three weeks will surely be enough, will it not? Yes? ah, well! I shall expect you before the end of March. You will come with the spring-time.

"*From the mother who loves you more than ever.*"

"And more than you deserve," said the colonel, passing his hand over his eyes that had filled with tears in spite of him.

"Ah! here is a postscript!

"Would you believe it? poor Jeanette, who has served me for thirty years, and who was present at your birth, has offered me all her savings. Seeing me weep, she felt sure that you must have got into some trouble, and written to me for money. Everybody here is devoted to you."

"Well, what do you say to all this?" demanded M. de Mornac. "Shall I send your groom out for a carriage to take you to the railway station?"

"My mother doesn't ask me to leave Paris immediately."

"I see you going! You will be sorry to cause her pain, but you will not be able to make up your mind to desert Violette."

"I shall certainly wait until Violette has made her *début* at the theater at which she has just been engaged."

"I was sure of it, and I shall make no attempt to alter your decision. I shall only be wasting my eloquence, and I don't like to preach: but I bring you some news that may modify your plans. Just now, as I was riding down the Rue Mozart in Passy, I saw Madame de Malvoisine on the balcony of a very pretty private house, talking with a gentleman I did not know, but who seemed to know me."

"The Rue Mozart? Why, it is there that the money-lender, to whom Gustave sent me, lives."

"What kind of a looking man is this usurer?"

"Rather tall and stoutly built. He wears a full beard, and is from forty to forty-five years of age."

"That is the very man I saw. Ah, well! my dear fellow, he is conspiring with the countess and her daughter to have Violette hissed."

"I thought he was in league with them. But why is he so bitter against poor Violette?"

"Because she has usurped the place of an actress in whom he is deeply interested—a certain Julia Pannetier, whose friendship the proud Herminia does not disdain."

"I have heard of her before. She lives on the Rue Rougemont, not far from here, and doesn't bear a very enviable reputation in the neighborhood."

"Well, this is the charming quartet with which Violette will have to contend when she makes her *début*."

Robert was about to protest that he was not afraid of these people when M. de Mornac, springing up and rush-

ing to the door at the further end of the smoking-room, exclaimed:

"What are you doing here? You are playing the spy on us, I believe."

As he spoke, he seized Jean the groom by the collar and dragged him into the presence of his astonished master.

"No, no; I was not listening, sir," protested the youth. "I swear I was not! When you seized me, I was just going to shake the dust out of the *portières*."

"Where did you pick up this fellow?" asked the colonel, turning to Robert.

"Near Rennes. He was born upon one of our estates, and I never had any cause to complain of him before."

Jean hung his head, but he did not appear much frightened. He was not more than eighteen years old, though he had the appearance of being over twenty, for he was a true Breton, with broad shoulders, a large round head, an intelligent face, and large brown eyes that usually met yours unflinchingly.

"Very well; get out of here, and don't let me catch you prowling around again," said the colonel, pushing him into the adjoining room, and closing the door upon him.

"I can't rid myself of the impression that he was listening to us," he remarked to Robert. "If I were in your place, I wouldn't keep him."

"He is devotedly attached to me, I assure you, colonel. I have noticed, though, that he has been going out rather too much for the past two or three months, and I shouldn't be surprised if he had made a conquest of some shop-girl in the neighborhood."

"Well, to return to the subject of which we were speaking a few moments ago; you seem to think yourself capable of defending Violette from the attacks of this usurer and these unscrupulous women, but I intend to second you in your efforts, and as a man who has been warned is equal to any two, I shall immediately see Cochard, and take

measures to prevent any disorder on the night of the first performance. Now, what are you going to say to your mother?"

"I shall tell her that she will see me before the end of March."

"And you will promise me to take no decisive step without your mother's knowledge and consent?"

"I give you my word of honor that I will not."

"Then you can count upon me. Come and see me as soon and as often as you can, and do try not to get into any more scrapes. If you are tempted to do so, reread the letter of the sainted mother who lives only for you. It will make you a better man, and save you from being again led astray. I will now leave you to your reflections, for I must go and see Cochard to warn him of the dastardly trick those people intend to play upon him. I am almost as deeply interested in the *débutante's* success as you are, for if she fails, Cochard will go into bankruptcy, and I shall never see my hundred thousand francs again."

With this farewell, the colonel went out to remount the horse that was waiting for him in the court-yard, and Becherel made no attempt to detain him.

CHAPTER VI.

Robert de Becherel was grateful to the colonel for having warned him of the plot against Violette, but he was not sorry to see him take his departure, for he wanted to be alone.

After his visit to the Rue de Constantinople, Robert had made up his mind to explore the mysterious building on the Rue Rodier that very evening—the building in which a woman who might be Violette's missing mother, was pining.

A single word had given him this new clew. Violette had suddenly recollected that her real name was Simone, and this was the word the prisoner had written with her

blood on the paper she had thrown into the street through one of the openings in the roof of her prison. This was enough, and more than enough, to make Robert resolve to reach her if such a thing were possible.

He had not said a word to Violette about his plans, however, for he feared he would arouse hopes that might not be realized, but he had hastened home, where he found a letter from his mother awaiting him—a letter that had only strengthened him in his resolution, for, though he understood perfectly well that his mother would never consent to his marriage with an actress, he flattered himself that she would not refuse a poor but worthy orphan.

If Violette should succeed in finding her mother, she would cheerfully abandon all idea of going on the stage. She had just assured him of this, in accents that dispelled all doubt of her sincerity, and now he was convinced of this, the dangers she would incur at her *début* at the Fantasies Lyriques troubled him much less, for he had reason to hope that she would not be subjected to this ordeal.

The possibility of treachery on the part of his groom very naturally troubled Robert a little under the circumstances. He had trusted the boy implicitly, and any betrayal of his confidence would be specially unfortunate at a time when he was more than ever in need of a faithful servant, if only to assist him in his preparations for the exploring expedition he had resolved to undertake that very night.

And, as a person always finds it easy to believe what he wishes to believe, Robert finally came to the conclusion that M. de Mornac must have been mistaken, especially as Jean had been selected by Mme. de Becherel from among many other applicants for the position, because she knew he was honest and industrious; so Robert confined himself to scolding him, and the youth defended himself so stoutly that his employer, convinced of his innocence, concluded to give him his instructions for the evening.

Robert had carefully considered the means to be employed in accomplishing the object, and his plans were completed even to the minutest details.

The first thing to be done was to procure two knotted ropes with a hook at each end—one rope very long, and the other much shorter; a dark-lantern, a small chisel, and a strong pair of pincers; and M. de Becherel could hardly purchase these articles himself, while Jean could perform the commissions without the slightest impropriety or inconvenience, as a servant often needs tools that a gentleman would hardly be expected to use.

Jean was naturally cautious, and even taciturn, like all Bretons—when they have not been drinking—and he received the order to purchase these articles without making any comment or evincing the slightest surprise.

"I am going out now," Robert said to him; "but I want you to put all these articles in a small trunk, with a change of linen, and a suit of clothes. I shall return here about nine o'clock, and you must then procure a carriage for me, and put my trunk on it. I intend to leave the city this evening by the Northern Railway, but I shall probably return some time to-morrow."

"Monsieur may be sure that everything will be in readiness," said Jean, laconically.

"Very well; go and make your purchases, and try not to forget anything."

The groom started out on his errand without replying, and Robert immediately sat down to write to his mother. His letter was affectionate, for he really adored his fond parent; but he said nothing definite about his plans. He casually remarked that there were some matters that might detain him in Paris for awhile, and gave her to understand that he did not despair of finding a situation quite as desirable as that he had lost. All these matters, however, would be decided between now and the latter part of the month, and his mother would soon see him again, in any

case. It is needless to say, however, that he carefully avoided any allusion to his possible marriage with the heiress.

The letter concluded, he hastened out, jumped into the first empty carriage he met, and alighted at the intersection of the Rue Milton and the Rue Rodier, for he wished to present himself on foot at the door of the Hôtel de la Providence, where he proposed to spend the night, if he found the room that overlooked the roof of the back building was vacant.

The entrance of this hotel was not imposing, by any means; but it was much more respectable in appearance than the old barrack guarded by Mother Rembriche, and the proprietor of the establishment was much more courteous and obliging than the majority of his *confrères*.

He rose instantly, when Becherel told him that he would like to engage a room for a fortnight, and replied:

"I have only one that is unoccupied just at the present time, and that is on the fourth story; but in a few days I shall have a better one to offer monsieur."

"In the fourth story!" thought Robert. "Why, that must be the very one I want."

But he only said:

"Very well; I will try to make it do for the present; but I should like to see it before I engage it."

"Certainly, sir. I will show it to you, of course. Have you much baggage? I ask, because the room is rather small."

"Only a small trunk that is now at the Northern Railway Station, and that I shall call for this evening if the room suits me."

"Very well, sir; I will now show you up, if you like."

The room was very small, and contained only a curtainless bed, two cane-seat chairs, and a pine table, adorned with a broken wash-bowl and pitcher; but Robert was not in pursuit of luxury now. He was interested only in the

view, and without even stopping to glance at the furniture, he walked straight to the window through whose dusty panes only a small amount of sunlight could force its way.

"I will have it washed," the proprietor made haste to say.

He might have dispensed with the promise, however; for Robert had perceived that the window overlooked the roof of the building Marcaudier had converted into a prison.

Robert opened the window, and leaning over the sill, remarked as if casually:

"The view from here is not bad."

"In the direction of Montmartre it is obstructed to some extent by the houses opposite, but you have a view of a very pretty garden, and it is a rare thing to get a glimpse of a bit of verdure in Paris; besides, the ground being high here, the air is excellent."

"I know it, and I should judge, too, that it must be very quiet here. I have to work at night sometimes, and I don't like to be disturbed."

"Oh, monsieur could not have chosen a better place in that respect. The noises of the city do not reach us here; besides, there is hardly any travel on the Rue Rodier. The building you see before us is unoccupied, and the owner of the house at the other end of the garden is away from home. Monsieur might suppose himself a hundred leagues from Paris, and if monsieur happens to be engaged in literary pursuits—"

"Precisely," interrupted Robert, delighted at this opportunity to attribute to himself some plausible profession. "I have written a play, and I came to Paris to submit it to the judgment of a celebrated author who resides on the Avenue Trudaine, not far from here. I shall probably have to make some changes in it, and am, therefore, anxious to secure quarters where I shall be free from interruption."

"Monsieur may be sure that no one will enter his room,

except at his request. I will give orders to that effect. Will monsieur take the room?"

"That depends upon the price," said Robert, the better to personate the rôle of traveler.

"Sixty francs a month, payable once a fortnight, in advance."

The dingy little room had never been rented for more than twenty-five francs a month before, and not often at that price; but Becherel would willingly have given five times the rent asked for the privilege of occupying it; so he immediately handed thirty francs to the proprietor, who pocketed the money with evident satisfaction, and said:

"If monsieur will now go down with me to the office, I will enter monsieur's name upon the register. It is a formality required by the police, as monsieur is doubtless aware."

Some of the difficulties of this rash undertaking were already becoming apparent; but this was not of a nature to daunt Robert, for there was nothing to prevent him from getting out of the difficulty by a slight prevarication.

The innkeeper, at his dictation, inscribed the name of Roberts in the column of names, and farmer in the place reserved for the profession or business of the guest.

Becherel's name was really Robert, and he did own several farms.

"I will be here with my trunk between nine and ten this evening," he remarked, when the formality of registering was concluded.

"Monsieur will find his room ready. There is no fireplace in it, but if monsieur desires a fire, I will have a portable stove carried up."

"That is not necessary. A table to write on, and a couple of candles will be all I shall need."

And Robert went away, well satisfied with the opening of his campaign. He might have obtained further information from his host, but he thought it more prudent not

to make any inquiries in regard to the neighbors, for an imprudent question might excite suspicion.

Everything was now in readiness, but several hours must elapse before Becherel could begin operations, so he thought he might as well employ the time pleasantly.

He accordingly strolled leisurely down the Boulevard des Italiens, and seated himself in front of Tortoni's, to smoke a cigar and watch the passers-by.

While thus engaged, he saw Gustave Piton enter the establishment in company with two other brokers, but as they showed no sign of having seen him, he concluded to remain. Gustave seemed to be in the best of spirits, and from this fact Becherel concluded that he must have devised some means of securing possession of the fruits of his fortunate speculation.

However this may have been, the gentlemen left the place after a stay of about twenty minutes, and soon after their departure, Robert crossed the boulevard to get his dinner at the Café Anglais.

He was not in the habit of taking his meals at this expensive restaurant: but it was not the first time he had entered it, and he felt none of the embarrassment that assails so many provincials when they venture into a public place frequented by wealthy and aristocratic Parisians.

He ordered a dinner that did honor to his knowledge of gastronomy, and wines suited to his situation—a bottle of old Musigny to give him strength, and a half bottle of excellent champagne, to bring about that confidence and that nervous energy so necessary when one is about to embark in a difficult undertaking; and this twofold result was so far attained that when he rose from the table about half past eight o'clock he felt ready and able to achieve wonders.

He then directed his steps homeward, and on arriving there, found that his orders had been judiciously and intelligently carried out, and that nothing had been forgotten;

so, after placing a revolver and a box of cartridges in his pocket, and buckling a belt like those worn in gymnasiums around his waist, he sent Jean out in search of a carriage.

When the vehicle arrived, and his trunk had been placed upon it, he went down-stairs, bade Jean take good care of the rooms until his master's return, and then loudly ordered the coachman to drive to the Northern Railroad Station.

On arriving there, he had his trunk carried into the waiting-room, and dismissed his carriage. A quarter of an hour afterward, he took another, had his trunk placed upon it, and gave the coachman the address of the Hôtel de la Providence.

A criminal or an outlaw would not have taken more pains to throw the police off the scent; but Becherel had several reasons for adopting this course. In the first place, he did not want Jean or the *concierge* to know where he was going, for he desired his nocturnal expedition to remain a secret, and in the second place he thought it possible that his new host might question the coachman in order to ascertain where his guest really came from.

The drive from the station to the hotel was not a long one, and his change of quarters was effected without any incident worthy of mention. The proprietor of the house received his new guest very cordially, and escorted him up to his room himself, followed by a shabbily dressed servant with the trunk.

The wash-bowl and pitcher had been removed from the table, and it was now furnished with writing materials, including a quire of foolscap and two candles.

As soon as these last had been lighted, Becherel thanked his host for his attentions and dismissed him, after which his first care was to satisfy himself that the door had a bolt on the inside, and finding there was one he both locked and bolted the door, placing the key on the inside so as to prevent any one from looking through the key-hole.

Thus protected alike from any sudden intrusion and from

espionage, Robert proceeded to unpack his trunk, removing from it everything except the suit of clothing, for which he had no immediate use and which he had brought with him chiefly to convince Jean that he was really going to the country; and after placing the other articles on the bed he cautiously opened the window.

The moon, which was in its last quarter, had not yet risen, and the night was very dark. Not a star glimmered in the sky and there was not a breath of air stirring.

Becherel consequently ran very little risk of being seen while he was making his way over the roof; but on the other hand the darkness made it impossible for him to calculate the exact distance that separated him from the field of his explorations.

Fortunately he had measured it pretty accurately with his eye during the day and knew that the roof to which he wished to descend was only seven or eight feet below his window, though it extended some distance beyond the hotel; but the only windows in this roof were on the side next the alley, so the great difficulty consisted in making his way up one side of the steep roof, over the comb, and then sliding down to the openings on the other side, which had probably been closed at nightfall.

The first part of the undertaking was much the easiest; for Robert, if he had not been obliged to regain his chamber again could have jumped down upon the roof without the slightest difficulty.

One question, however, remained to be decided. At what hour should he begin work?

Of course the longer he deferred the undertaking the less danger he ran of being troubled by inquisitive neighbors, provided he allowed himself time to complete it before daylight; but on the other hand if he deferred it too long he might become nervous and possibly discouraged, hence it would perhaps be advisable for him to profit by his present ardor. Besides, the quiet residents of that neighborhood

probably retired at a very early hour. Even now, though a neighboring clock had struck ten only a few minutes before, all the inmates of the Hôtel de la Providence seemed to be asleep.

The proprietor had not exaggerated when he extolled the remarkable quietness of the place. No sound reached Robert's ears; and as he leaned from the window he could see no light except the reflection of the street lamps on the Rue Milton. Marcaudier's house concealed those on the Rue Rodier from him. This profound stillness and the total absence of light in any of the surrounding houses made him decide upon immediate action.

It was not very cold; and his coat would only hamper his movements, so he took it off, buckled his belt more tightly around him, put the chisel and pincers in his pockets, lighted his lantern, lowered the shade so as to conceal the blaze of the candle from view, and hung it around his neck with a chain provided for that purpose. This done, he twined around his chest the longer of the two ropes, and after thus equipping himself he fastened the short one securely to the window-sill; he then crawled out upon the window-ledge feet foremost, and seizing the first knot in the rope with both hands, he lowered himself to the roof below. It took him only an instant to reach it; but the next step would prove a much more difficult one, as it would consist in dragging himself up to the comb of the roof—no easy matter, when this roof is covered with slates closely overlapping one another, and presenting no projections to serve as points of support.

Robert did not hesitate, however, and by dint of strength and perseverance finally succeeded in reaching the comb of the roof. This feat accomplished, he paused to take breath and also to examine the side upon which he must next venture.

As he had foreseen, the small windows in the roof were closed, and no ray of light was visible through them; but

this might be due either to their extreme thickness or to the fact that the interior of the garret was shrouded in darkness. In either case Robert's task was now rendered more difficult by the necessity of prying open one or both of these windows with his chisel, and the danger of slipping during the operation.

Robert was about to venture upon this inclined plane when he saw a light suddenly appear in the second story of the private house fronting on the Rue Milton; but the light vanished almost instantly, to appear a moment afterward in the story below, only to again disappear: and Robert felt sure that this light was carried by some one who was descending to the basement of the house and from there perhaps into the garden.

To satisfy himself of this fact he crawled cautiously to the end of the building, and then stretched himself out at full length, with his head projecting beyond the gable end; but though his position was by no means comfortable he was soon well repaid for his trouble, for only a minute afterward he saw a man with a lantern coming slowly down the garden and straight toward the building on which he was perched. Certainly this person, whose features were concealed from the anxious watcher's gaze by the darkness, had not left the house at this hour of the night merely to stroll about the garden: so Robert felt very little surprise when he saw the man, when directly beneath him, open a door and enter this same mysterious building. The inmates of the house on the Rue Milton also had access to this extension of Marcaudier's house, that was evident.

Were they, then, the usurer's accomplices, or was there really, as Cash on Delivery declared, a party wall that divided the building into two parts? It seemed more than probable, however, that the prison in which the woman was confined had two doors, one opening into the house on the Rue Rodier and the other into the garden; and in that case there could be no doubt of the neighbor's complicity.

However this might be, the mystery was certainly deepening; and Becherel, though greatly perplexed, was obliged to wait for the man to emerge before taking any further action in the matter, for it was not impossible that the man was with the prisoner at that very moment. He had, perhaps, come to bring her food; and in that case, his visit was not likely to be a long one.

Robert continued to watch, therefore; but he had seated himself astride the comb of the roof a little further back from the gable end of the building, and was now dividing his attention between the garden and the windows in the roof.

Soon it seemed to him that the panes of glass became a little more brilliant, as if there was a light beneath them, but a very faint light, like that of a lantern. He did think strongly of satisfying himself of the fact, but he said to himself that he would probably be unable to see anything by reason of the thickness of the glass, and that he had better remain where he could command a view of the garden.

It was well that he did, for in about five minutes the windows became dim again, and a few minutes afterward the man reappeared in the garden still carrying his lantern; and Robert, who was watching him, saw him re-enter the house and extinguish his light before closing the door.

That was all. The house remained dark and silent, so the man probably departed as he had come—by way of the Rue Milton—so he did not live in the house, and everything seemed to indicate that he would not return again that night.

The aspect of the situation had suddenly changed. The jailer who was guarding the prisoner was probably not Marcaudier after all, for Marcaudier would hardly have taken the trouble to make such a long détour.

But if Robert intended to rescue the victim, the moment had now come to make the attempt.

Becherel proposed to lower himself into the garret with the aid of the long knotted rope; and he did not altogether despair of inducing the prisoner to leave it with him and make her way over the roof to his room in the Hôtel de la Providence, where she would be safe until he could take her elsewhere, for her tormentor would not think of coming there to look for her.

If she refused to attempt a journey that was certainly rather difficult and dangerous for a woman, he could at least have a conversation with her and induce her to tell him her story; and when he had learned her history he would go, in company with Colonel Mornac, and inform the nearest commissioner of police of the facts and request him to put an end to this state of affairs.

Robert accordingly made his way cautiously along the comb of the roof until he reached a point directly above the nearest window, then lying flat upon his stomach, he slid down the roof, feet foremost, steadying himself as well as he could with his hands. A professional tiler might have attempted this feat without much danger; but Becherel, who had no experience in such matters, certainly ran a great risk of losing his life.

Fortunately the slope was more gradual than on the other side of the roof, and though it took Robert fully ten minutes to make the descent he finally succeeded in securing a position directly under the window, and where the space left by a broken slate furnished him with an insecure foothold.

He began work by unrolling the rope coiled around his body; he then detached his lantern, which had been greatly in his way in the descent, placed it on the roof within reach, surrounding it with a coil of rope to hold it in place, and then drawing the chisel from his pocket he inserted the slender end of it under the lower corner of the window-sash.

The window was heavy, and Becherel had a great deal

of difficulty in starting it, for it had not been made to open outward, but it was provided on the inside with two iron supports that worked in a piece of notched iron and prevented the window from falling.

After the first slight raising of the sash was accomplished, Robert placed both hands upon the chisel and bore all his weight upon it. Soon a grating sound warned him that the iron arms had caught in the notches, and that the sash, sustained by these supports, would remain open.

The opening was quite large enough for a man to pass through; but before venturing he cautiously put his head in to see what he could see, but he could distinguish nothing in the dark depths below, nor could he hear the slightest sound.

Nevertheless the prisoner must be there, as her jailer had left the house alone; so Robert concluded she was asleep. He did not think for an instant of abandoning the undertaking so fortunately begun, however. There was a steel hook at each end of his rope, one large and one small, and he fastened the largest to one of the iron supports that upheld the window and which was quite strong enough to sustain the weight of his body.

But he did not want to descend until after he had secured a look at the depths below, for it was by no means improbable that the prisoner was guarded by an assistant jailer, who would attack Robert as soon as he reached the floor and before he had even time to assume an attitude of defense. So he attached his lantern to the small hook at the other end of the rope, and he was about to lower it into the garret when the broken tile upon which his feet were resting gave way.

He felt himself sliding down the roof with the swiftness of lightning, and thought he was lost. To say that he did not lose his wits for an instant would be doing him too much honor; but the instinct of self-preservation remained and supplied the place of the missing will.

Involuntarily Becherel stretched out his arms to clutch something, and his right hand coming in contact with the rope that had been fastened to the iron support, he clung to it with all the energy of despair. It was a fortunate thing for him that he had seized it not more than a yard from its point of attachment, for if he had caught hold of it lower down it might not have successfully resisted the strain caused by the sudden jerk, which was much less severe under the present circumstances.

This fact is perfectly understood by all mountain explorers and Alpine travelers. Four tourists, one of whom was an English nobleman, perished a number of years ago simply because they had allowed the rope that bound them to one another to become too slack, and a misstep made by the last person in the line dragged them all down a frightful precipice.

Becherel was more fortunate; but his descent was so rapid, and the window was only such a short distance from the eaves, that before he could stop himself his legs were beyond the spouting.

The lantern, too, was dangling quite a little distance below him; and as the light in it was still burning, it might attract the attention of pedestrians on the Rue Rodier.

But no one seemed to be passing; besides, such a possibility was the least of Becherel's troubles. He was thinking only of escaping from his perilous position, so the first thing he did was to seize the rope tightly with both hands, for he knew that he would not be able to sustain himself long with the right.

When he had done this, and succeeded in raising himself enough to get one knee on the spouting, he thought himself virtually saved, though he realized that the frail support might give way beneath him at any instant. He did not remain on this dangerous perch long, however, but slowly and laboriously raising himself, hand over hand, he

at last reached the open window again, and then drew up the rope that had saved him from death.

The candle in the lantern was still burning, and the time had come to make use of it in lighting the depths below, so Becherel cautiously lowered it, and found that the ceiling of the room in which the unfortunate woman he had come to deliver was confined could not be more than ten feet high. The floor was bare, and Becherel not only saw no furniture, but no sign of the prisoner.

Still, the light must have woke her, even if she was asleep, so why was she crouching in some corner of her dungeon instead of approaching the lantern? Did she not understand that this light, descending from above, indicated that succor was at hand?

Becherel perceived now that the light with which he had provided himself would be of very little service to him unless he descended with it, but he was unwilling to do this until he had satisfied himself that an enemy was not lying in wait for him below, so he deferred action yet a little longer.

His patience was finally rewarded.

After about five minutes of attentive watching he saw something moving within the lighted circle. One might have supposed it the bottom of a swaying curtain appearing and disappearing at regular intervals—a fragment of material that certainly did not move itself, and that must be the bottom of some garment, doubtless of a trailing dress, and Becherel rightly judged that the recluse must be walking around the lantern, as a moth, attracted by the light, circles around it without daring to approach it.

"She will finally make up her mind to touch it," Robert said to himself, and he was right, for after revolving around it a number of times, she suddenly knelt down and examined the light.

It was certainly a woman, and she was enveloped in a long wrapper that covered her from her neck to her feet.

She was bending so low over the light that Becherel could not even catch a glimpse of her face, but he hoped that she would finally pick up the lantern and hold it up over her head for the purpose of ascertaining where it came from, and who had lowered it.

He was disappointed in this hope, however, for the prisoner after a short halt, hastily retreated, and again became invisible. She had probably taken refuge at the other end of the garret.

Robert could scarcely hope for her return now, and if he desired to carry the investigation any further he must certainly venture down himself. The chisel he had used was still lying on the roof fortunately, for it might have fallen into the street, and Becherel, who did not want to leave any trace of his visit, hastily replaced it in his pocket, and then turning, he introduced his feet into the opening and began to descend with the aid of the knotted rope.

This was mere child's play in comparison with the difficulties he had already overcome, and he soon reached the floor below. As soon as he set foot upon it he unhooked the lantern from the rope, and started in search of the prisoner. He did not see her at first, but he perceived that the only article of furniture in the room was a cot bed with a tick filled with straw upon it. There was not even a chair or a table, nothing but a long shelf fastened to the wall, a stone pitcher, and in one corner a torn screen.

Upon the shelf were the remains of a hermit's repast, some decayed fruit and a morsel of moldy cheese. The prisoners at Mazas fare infinitely better, and Becherel wondered how a human being could manage to subsist upon such a diet.

Where was the victim of this barbarity? She could not have left the garret, so Robert immediately proceeded to explore the dungeon, which was but imperfectly lighted by the lantern.

Robert rather expected to find the recluse hiding behind

the screen, but he did not expect to find her crouching upon the floor with her face buried in her hands. He did not see her at first, but on moving the screen he nearly stumbled over her, and warned by this sudden collision, he lowered his lantern until the light fell full upon the bowed form of the unfortunate woman.

"Rise, madame," he said, kindly, touching her lightly upon the shoulder.

Her only reply was a low moan.

"I have come to release you," he added, gently.

On hearing these words she straightened herself up a little, and partially revealed a face emaciated by privations and distorted with terror.

"Do not harm me," she murmured, imploringly.

"You have nothing to fear. I am a friend," replied Becherel.

And as she did not move, he took her by the hand and raised her to her feet. She offered no resistance, and Becherel could examine her at his leisure, for she remained as motionless as a statue. It was evidently fear that thus petrified her, for she gazed at Becherel with such terrified eyes that she looked like a prisoner who sees her executioner suddenly appear before her.

She was clothed in a long loose gown of coarse gray flannel, very like a monk's robe in shape. Her head was covered with a mass of disheveled gray hair, and her face was wax-like in its pallor.

Still she must once have been very handsome, for her features were remarkably regular and delicate. It was difficult to decide upon her age. By her wrinkled and haggard face one would have supposed her at least sixty, but she might have been much younger. Solitude and cruel treatment age prisoners very rapidly. When Latude left the Bastile he looked like a centenarian.

Becherel endeavored to discover some resemblance between this woman and Violette, but he utterly failed, and

he soon perceived that the light of his lantern troubled the unfortunate woman, who was undoubtedly accustomed to live in comparative darkness. The light dazzled her, and to escape it, she closed her eyes like an owl surprised by a ray of sunlight.

Robert, who had not let go of her hand, perceived that she was trembling violently, so he led her to the cot and placed his lantern on the shelf that served her as a table.

She seated herself mechanically on the side of the cot, and sat there without moving or speaking.

Robert thought she was waiting for him to question her.

"I had a great deal of difficulty in reaching you, madame," he said, gently, "and we have no time to lose. The man who was here just now may take it into his head to return—"

"No, he will not return until to-morrow night," murmured the prisoner.

"He will not find you if you will consent to follow me."

"Follow you?"

"Yes, and immediately. It is not an easy road to travel, it is true, but I will help you."

She did not appear to understand him, so Robert pointed to the opening overhead. She glanced up at it, but dropped her head again, almost instantly, and did not utter a word. Becherel saw her shudder.

"You are afraid to venture?" asked Becherel.

She made a sign of assent.

"Ah, well! even if you are afraid to make the dangerous journey I can save you all the same. Tell me who you are. Tell me your story, and I swear that you shall be free to-morrow. I will inform the authorities that you are detained against your will, and at their order the doors of your dungeon will be opened, and the wretches who have immured you here will be punished. Tell me all, I beseech you. You must understand what I say to you. I am awaiting your response."

The response did not come, however, and Becherel began to wonder if he was not dealing with an idiot; still, he did not lose heart.

"You can not have lived here always," he continued. "You must have lived somewhere before you were confined in this horrible place. You must have had a name. Tell me what it was."

"A name!" repeated the woman, vacantly.

"Yes. What were you called?"

"I don't know; I have forgotten."

"Make an effort to recollect, and your memory will surely return."

"I can not."

Robert could scarcely credit this total obliteration of a faculty that becomes impaired with age, but that is never entirely lost. Old people do not remember facts of recent occurrence, but they recollect those of a remote date very plainly; and even idiots and lunatics retain some recollection of their past.

Robert, who was aware of this fact, did not abandon all hope, but he adopted another means of ascertaining what he wanted to know.

"You lived in a seaport town, did you not?" he asked, abruptly.

"The sea—yes, I have seen it. It is beautiful."

"You lived in Havre, I believe."

"Havre? No, I know no such place."

"The deuce! it seems that I must have been mistaken," thought Becherel. "In fact, all maritime towns have piers."

"But you, at least, know who Marcaudier is," he added, aloud.

This new attempt proved no more successful than the first, however. The recluse looked at him with a bewildered air; she had evidently never heard of Marcaudier before.

The further Becherel proceeded with his investigation the more convinced he became that he had been mistaken in his suspicions, and already he was inclined to believe the usurer innocent of the crime of which he had formerly accused him.

It might be, after all, that Cash on Delivery was not the culprit. Indeed, from what he had seen on the roof, Robert was inclined to think that this woman's persecutor resided in the house on the Rue Milton.

"Do you know where you are?" continued Robert.

The prisoner shook her head.

"You are in Paris—in a house that fronts on the Rue Rodier and extends to a garden on the Rue Milton."

These names seemed to make no impression on the prisoner, but she exclaimed:

"A garden? I love gardens! There are flowers in them?"

"You had one years ago, probably."

"Yes, it was full of roses."

"Why did you leave it?"

The light that had shone in the unfortunate woman's eyes a moment before suddenly became dim, and she again relapsed into the torpor that so disheartened Becherel.

Had she really lost her mind, or was she only playing a part—answering unimportant questions, but ignoring all of a compromising nature.

An idea that in spite of his protestations of friendship she might take him for an emissary sent by her jailer occurred to him.

"She is so afraid of him that she dares not commit herself," he said to himself. "Perhaps she is even afraid that he is listening at the door by which he entered and left the room. She fears that he is setting a trap for her, and that he will kill her if she complains of his ill treatment."

The supposition seemed plausible enough certainly, for the scoundrel's victim still maintained the submissive,

cringing attitude of a dog that is in the habit of being beaten. It was necessary, consequently, to reassure her, but this was no easy matter, as all the protestations in the world would have very little weight with her.

Still the matter must be settled one way or the other, for he was still in doubt whether he was in the presence of Violette's mother or not. But he had in reserve a final test which he fancied must prove decisive. If this did not solve the mystery, there would be nothing left for him but to go away as he had come. The mystery of the recluse interested him only so far as it concerned Violette, and if it did not concern her he cared very little about delivering a stranger—a mad woman too, who ought perhaps to be kept in confinement.

This feeling was not very generous perhaps, but it was at least excusable in a person in Robert's situation.

"You misunderstand my intentions, perhaps," he continued, after a pause. "I am your sincere well wisher, and though I do not know all the events of your life, I at least know that you have a daughter."

Robert was by no means sure of this fact, however, but the well-known maneuver of telling a falsehood to get at the truth seemed at first likely to prove successful.

The prisoner gave a violent start; her eyes sparkled and she lifted up her head. One might have supposed that the maternal feeling had suddenly revived in her crushed heart.

"Shall I tell you her name?" asked Becherel, in even gentler tones. "Her name is Simone."

"Simone!" repeated the unfortunate woman, passing her hand over her brow; "yes, I know the name. I have heard it before, but I have no daughter. No, I have none."

The memory of the recluse had evidently received a shock, but the shock had not been sufficiently severe to render it lucid, and Violette's lover saw that he would have to begin over again.

"She is nineteen years old," he continued, "and she is a beautiful blonde, with dark eyes. She must have been lovely even in her infancy. You surely can not have forgotten her—if she were here, you would recognize her I am sure."

He received no reply, but he could see that the blow had told.

The drawn features of the recluse showed plainly enough that she was making a desperate effort to recover the almost broken thread of her ideas. The swelled veins stood out like whip-cords under her wax-like skin, and the big drops of sweat that covered her forehead betrayed a violent mental struggle.

It might be that solitude and privations had caused this loss of reason in her case. This was more than probable, indeed, for Robert could no longer suspect her of feigning madness to conceal her secret, for it was evident that she was suffering terribly.

"If I should take you to see her, you would be very glad, would you not? And the poor child who has mourned your loss for so many years would bless me for restoring her mother to her."

"Simone? Did you say that her name was Simone?"

"Yes, and this name must certainly remind you of the time when you held her in your arms. You can now enjoy that happiness again. There is nothing to prevent you from seeing her again if you will only summon up courage to leave this horrible place with me."

"But how?" asked the prisoner, brusquely. "He locked and barred the door to-night as he always does."

"Who is he?"

"My persecutor—the cruel man who keeps me here to die of cold and starvation. I have implored him a hundred times to kill me, and end my sufferings, but he will not."

"Why does he torture you thus?"

"I do not know."

"But you must know who he is."

"No."

"But you can certainly describe his face to me, as he comes here every night."

"He always comes masked. I have never seen his face."

"That is very strange, but it is conclusive proof that you must know him. If you had never seen him in former years, when you were free, he would not take this precaution. He must speak to you, however—"

"Very rarely. He throws my food to me as if I were a dog; and when I complain he never even answers me."

All this shed no light upon the mystery Becherel was trying to solve, but it seemed to him that the prisoner was beginning to understand better what was wanted of her. If the poor creature was mad, as he had good reason to fear, she certainly had her lucid moments by which he must endeavor to profit, if possible.

So Robert lost no time in reverting to the name that had made a fleeting but very strong impression upon the prisoner, judging by the change in her countenance.

"You pretend that you have no daughter," he remarked, "but you know very well that you had one, and that she disappeared. You think she is dead, probably, but she lives, I swear it! She is looking for you, and I have promised to find you for her."

He paused, for he saw that she had ceased to listen to him. Her mind seemed to be in the clouds, and she closed her eyes like one in a dream. How was he to arouse her from this lethargy?

A new idea suddenly occurred to him. The apple and the paper in which it had been wrapped were still in his pocket, and he decided to make use of them.

"You are silent when I speak of Simone," he said, "and you seem to have forgotten her; and yet you remem-

her sometimes, as you summon her to your aid, for it was certainly you who threw me this."

As he spoke he showed her the apple and the paper on which she had written with her blood the name he had just uttered.

The effect was instantaneous, but exactly contrary to what he had hoped, for she had scarcely glanced at the articles held out for her inspection, when she suddenly sprung to her feet, exclaiming:

"It is false! I have written nothing! I have thrown nothing! You lie! You have invented this story to get me beaten. You are a cruel man. Go away! I never want to see you again. If you speak to me again I shall not answer you."

And before he had time to prevent it she fled to the other end of the garret, and again concealed herself behind the screen. It was certainly madness now, and frantic madness, for she began to utter wild and despairing shrieks.

Becherel was utterly at a loss what to do, and he began to ask himself if his undertaking was not as insane as this woman, for how was he to calm her and induce her to listen to reason? He could not flatter himself now that he would be able to resume the conversation at the point to which he had conducted it prior to the unfortunate resolve that had spoiled everything.

The worst of all this was that the cries did not cease. She was uttering incoherent words now, and he recognized the voice as the same he heard when he lost his way in the passage on his first visit to Marcaudier; but now it was raised to such a pitch that it must almost reach the street.

The situation was becoming extremely critical, for passers-by or neighbors might hear the sound, and imagining that a woman was being murdered, insist upon the interference of the police.

For the first time since the beginning of the adventure

he thought of beating a retreat before he had conducted it to a successful termination. It was a great disappointment to him to be obliged to leave before he had solved the mystery, but there seemed to be no help for it.

He waited, however, with a faint hope that the recluse would become quiet and consent to listen to reason. Human strength has its limits, and one can not shriek on indefinitely. The woman would certainly be obliged to cease when her voice failed her, and that was already becoming weaker.

A few moments more and these alarming cries must cease, and Robert was about to approach the unfortunate creature, so as to be able to take immediate advantage of the first opportunity to make himself heard when he was deterred by a loud pounding on the outside of the door.

Who was rapping? Certainly not Marcaudier, for he was not likely to be at the house on the Rue Rodier at that hour of the night.

"Will you stop your noise, you hussy?" cried a voice that Becherel thought he recognized as the voice of Mother Rembriche.

The effect of this coarse order was instantaneous. Not another sound escaped the prisoner.

But though the rapping ceased, there was nothing to prove that the hideous old portress was not standing there still, with her ear at the key-hole, and this possibility decided Robert. He said to himself that if he should attempt to talk with the prisoner, or even to approach her, the cries might begin again, and Rembriche, who seemed to possess her employer's entire confidence, undoubtedly had a key to the iron-barred door, and might enter for the purpose of punishing the prisoner for the disturbance she had made, and in that case Robert, on finding himself face to face with the old hag, would have no alternative but to take the stranger's part.

He was strongly tempted to do this now, but such an act

might only make her situation still more intolerable, for if every door was standing open, he was by no means sure that the unfortunate woman would consent to follow him out of the house; and even if she did, what would he do with her, for it was very doubtful if he could succeed in finding a carriage, and if he did it was not unlikely that she would absolutely refuse to enter it. Under these circumstances it would probably be better to leave her where she was, and make another attempt to rescue her at some future day.

Hastily extinguishing the lantern for fear that a ray of light might make its way through the key-hole, and warn Mother Rembriche that the prisoner was not alone, he again fastened it around his neck, and seizing the knotted rope, made his way nimbly to the window in the roof, pulled the rope up after him, unhooked it, and then closed the window, though not without considerable difficulty, for the supports were rusty and did not move very readily. He succeeded in lowering the sash, however, and everything having been put in place, he undertook his return journey.

This was made without any accident this time, and he soon found himself in his poorly furnished chamber safe and sound, but far from satisfied with the result of his expedition.

He had seen with his own eyes that a woman was confined in that gloomy attic, but there was nothing to prove that this woman was Violette's mother. She had evinced some emotion on hearing the name of Simone, but she had speedily recovered from it, and he had been unable to extort any definite information from her.

The unfortunate woman was mad; Robert was convinced of that, but she was certainly none the less worthy of interest on that account, as she was detained there by force and was certainly very cruelly treated. But Becherel was beginning to get over his chivalrous notions. He said to himself that the poor creature's relatives might have good

reasons for guarding her themselves instead of placing her in an insane asylum—private reasons that did not justify them in maltreating her, but that certainly did not concern strangers.

Who were these inhuman relatives? The occupants of the house on the Rue Milton probably. Marcaudier must be their accomplice, or at least their confidant, as his portress guarded the prisoner.

But there was no apparent connection between this unfortunate affair and Violette's history.

"And even if I should discover for a certainty that this unfortunate woman brought Violette into the world," thought Robert, "what would Violette do with an insane mother—a mother who could not even tell her the secret of her birth, as she has lost her memory as well as her reason. It would only be a fresh disappointment for Violette, and a heavy responsibility, to say nothing of the fact that I should only incense Marcaudier still more deeply against the poor child by wresting the victim from her persecutors. It would certainly be better for me to abandon for the present a project that would only increase the dangers of Violette's situation. I had better consult Colonel Mornac perhaps before abandoning the undertaking, but I don't much like the idea of telling him about my unfortunate expedition; he would be sure to laugh at me. I know too, the advice he would give me. He would advise me to let the matter drop, I am sure, and I think he is quite right. 'Don't run after two hares at the same time,' the proverb says, and I shall have quite enough to do to defend Violette against the enemies that have leagued themselves together against her."

So with the fickleness that was one of his greatest faults Robert de Becherel suddenly abandoned the scheme upon which he had based all his hopes. He had dreamed of restoring a mother to Violette, who would then abandon her plan of going on the stage, and whom he could subsequent-

ly marry with the approval of his mother—his dear mother, who might arrive in Paris at any moment—and now this fine scheme had all ended in smoke, and Robert was thinking only of insuring the *débutante's* success, without asking himself to what his increasing love for the fair Violette was likely to lead.

Having come to this conclusion, he felt strongly tempted to return to his comfortable rooms on the Boulevard Poissonnière, but he could hardly depart in the middle of the night without exciting the suspicions of his host; besides, he was unwilling to leave his trunk filled with compromising articles behind him. It would be much better for him to defer his departure until the next day, and then announce that a telegram received that morning compelled him to return home immediately, to his very great regret.

After smoking an incredible number of cigars, and walking up and down his room a hundred times, Becherel finally concluded to go to bed.

He had considerable difficulty in getting to sleep, but fatigue coming to his aid, he finally succeeded in closing his eyes, muttering:

"The deuce take the mad woman! The deuce take Marcaudier! Live Violette and the Fantasies Lyriques!"

CHAPTER VII.

THREE weeks had elapsed and Robert de Becherel had made no attempt to repeat his visit to the garret on the Rue Rodier.

For a few days the poor woman he had left to the mercy of her persecutors was ever in his mind, and more than once he was on the point of relating his discovery to the commissioner of police of that precinct. Had he been in his native town he certainly would have done so, but being a comparative stranger in a large city, such a step on his

part would be likely to involve him in considerable trouble.

To excuse himself in his own eyes, he told himself that it would not be too late to deliver the prisoner after Violette had made her *début*. That, if this *début* proved a success, Violette would have no further need of him; and that if she failed, there would still be a chance of his finding her relatives in Havre or elsewhere, as it could not be her mother who was languishing in the den on the Rue Rodier; but all this specious reasoning was, in reality, only an excuse for his indifference in regard to the fate of the recluse.

The plain truth was that he was madly in love with Violette, that he now lived only for her, and that it mattered very little to him whether she found her relatives or not, provided she returned his love.

He saw Violette at her own home every day, after her return from rehearsal, for he would not go to the theater for fear of compromising her.

Their conversation would have bored the colonel almost to death, as he was not of a sentimental turn of mind, but they enjoyed it immensely, and Violette, without absolutely revealing to Robert the secret of her heart, had allowed him to divine it. In fact, she no longer attempted to conceal that she loved him, and she troubled herself very little about the future. She was seriously imperiling her peace of mind, it is true, but she had confidence in herself, and in her own sense of right, and believed Robert incapable of taking advantage of the love he had inspired; nor had she had any cause to complain, or to regret the course she had pursued, for up to the present time everything had gone on as smoothly as heart could desire.

Cochard, feeling confident that her *début* would prove a brilliant success, spoiled and petted her as the owner of a racing stable pets the horse with which he expects to capture the Grand Prize. The composers of the opera rubbed

their hands as complacently as if they had discovered a gold mine, and even the other performers were obliged to admit that the fair Julia's successor was an accomplished musician and a *cantatrice* of the first order.

She had learned her rôle with extraordinary ease, and now knew it so thoroughly, and was so sure of her effects, that she felt none of that fear of feeling afraid that generally troubles *débutantes*.

Colonel Mornac attended most of the rehearsals. He, too, felt confident of Violette's success, and he did not conceal his opinion from Becherel who frequently breakfasted with him, but he did not think it advisable to remind the protégé of the disadvantages of his infatuation for an actress. A young man twenty-four years of age rarely listens to this kind of sermon, and M. de Mornac did not like to waste his breath.

Of his recent adventure, Robert had said never a word, and as the colonel had never thought his young friend really in earnest in his intention of searching for Violette's relatives, he never alluded to a subject in which he took very little interest.

Marcaudier had given no sign of life. Becherel had written to him, announcing his desire to take up the note, but the usurer had made no response, so Becherel had concluded to wait until the note became due.

The prodigal son had written frequently to his mother, and from the letters he received in reply, Robert could see that his parent's patience was nearly exhausted, and that she might make up her mind to start for Paris at any moment.

Violette often inquired about Mme. de Becherel, and looked forward with delight to meeting her, little suspecting the greeting the aristocratic and devout lady was likely to bestow upon a singer at the Fantasies Lyriques.

A few weeks before she had been less sanguine about the result of this meeting, but her happiness imparted a rose-colored hue to everything.

There was one matter of an extremely annoying nature that Violette had not mentioned to her lover, however. For the last fortnight she had been receiving anonymous letters from a gentleman who offered her, not his hand and heart, but his protection and fortune.

The young girl had paid no attention to the first letter, but in those that followed he had been more explicit. He offered her a cozy little establishment of her own—that dream of all *débutantes*—thirty thousand francs in bonds, and a monthly allowance almost equal to one twelfth of a cabinet minister's yearly salary.

And in return for this unparalleled generosity, he asked nothing, at least for the present, not even an interview. He did not even say where he had seen Violette, but he promised to reveal his identity on the evening of the first performance.

Violette, of course, had no intention of accepting the offers of this unknown adorer, but she foresaw that she would have considerable difficulty in avoiding his attentions; and she feared that Robert, if he discovered the truth, would challenge this man as he had challenged Galimas at the house of Mme. de Malvoisine. She did not want her lover to imperil his life on her account, so she resolved not to ask his aid, but to protect herself.

To the great relief of both Robert and Violette, the day on which the first performance was to take place dawned at last. Everything had been in readiness for more than a week, but the manager, who was an adept in the art of advertising, had excited public curiosity to the uttermost by deferring the *début* of the young and beautiful Mlle. Thabor from day to day, upon divers pretexts; and every morning there appeared in the papers a few cleverly written lines announcing that a star of the first magnitude was about to appear upon the stage of the Fantasies Lyriques.

Violette had not been willing that her own pretty name should figure in these notices, and upon the posters, so she

had taken for her *début* the name of Marie Thabor, that had been given her years before, in Rennes. All sorts of rumors were rife in relation to her. Some said that Cochard had discovered her at the house of a spurious countess, where she played the piano at so much a month, and that she was remarkably pretty.

Every seat in the house had been sold for more than a week, and the colonel, who had an extensive acquaintance, had aided not a little in spreading the report that a paragon of beauty and talent was about to display herself to the admiring gaze of the public.

M. de Mornac had not thought it worth while to tell the manager why he took such a deep interest in Mlle. Thabor, and Cochard was not even aware of Robert de Becherel's existence, and supposed the old soldier's evident desire for the success of this venture was a very natural aversion to losing his one hundred thousand francs.

He had heard that the *débutante's* enemies had formed a cabal against her, but he counted upon the benevolence of the public and the beauty and talent of his new actress to avert this danger.

He depended, too, upon his leader of the claque.

The colonel had also given his instructions to this dispenser of applause, the important personage upon whose tact and address the success or failure of a play and of an actress not unfrequently depends.

The colonel had taken the matter deeply to heart, and had devoted all his time and influence to it. He had also purchased a large number of seats in which he intended to place his friends of both sexes.

Nor had he missed a single rehearsal. On the contrary, he had been ever on hand to encourage and advise Violette, and to conciliate the other performers, who had not been very favorably disposed toward her at first, especially the women.

Robert had sedulously refrained from any act or atten-

tion that would compromise Violette in the least, but he had no intention of carrying his self-sacrifice so far as to absent himself from the first performance, though he had sworn not to go behind the scenes. He had merely purchased a well-located orchestra-chair, and he had resolved not to leave it until the end of the performance.

The final rehearsal had taken place with closed doors. Even the newspaper critics had not been admitted, this unusual precaution being only another ruse of Cochard's to excite the curiosity and eagerness of the public to the highest possible pitch.

On the morning of the eventful day, Robert breakfasted with the colonel, who seemed more and more confident, though the subject of Violette's *début* was scarcely broached. On the eve of a duel, the man who is to fight is not much inclined to talk with his second about the approaching encounter.

After leaving the colonel, Robert went straight to the Rue de Constantinople, for Violette, who was obliged to be at the theater some time before the rising of the curtain, would not be able to see him at five o'clock, as usual. She even insisted upon shortening this interview, and after twenty minutes of confidential conversation they parted, with the agreement that Robert was to wait for Violette in a carriage at the artists' entrance, after the close of the performance, and escort her home, but that they were to exchange no sign of recognition while she was on the stage.

On leaving her, Becherel went straight home to dress.

He was obliged to dine earlier than usual, as the performance began at eight o'clock, and he wanted to take a short walk before dinner to quiet his nerves, for he was more uneasy and excited than he would have been willing to admit.

On reaching his lodgings, he found Jean engaged in brushing his clothes, and making preparations for his master's toilet. Since the reproof that M. de Mornac had ad-

ministered to this youth, whom he had accused of listening at doors. Becherel had been very well satisfied with the conduct of his groom.

He had sent him to the Hôtel de la Providence for the trunk left there, and Jean had performed this rather delicate mission very satisfactorily, and when he gave an account of the expedition, he had evinced no surprise at the fact that his master, who had ostensibly left the city by the Northern Railway, should have sent his trunk to a second-class lodging-house on the Rue Rodier.

Jean was certainly a valuable servant, whatever the colonel might say. He continued to go out rather too often, but as Robert spent most of his time away from home, his servant's absence caused him no inconvenience.

He had never mentioned Violette's name, in the youth's presence, so he supposed, and with reason, that Jean must be ignorant of her existence.

Though Robert had not announced his intention of going to the theater that evening, it was not difficult to divine it, so he was not surprised to hear Jean ask permission to remain out until midnight, in order that he might be able to pay a visit to a compatriot who had just arrived in Paris. At the same time, Jean handed him a letter that had been received by post. It did not bear the Rennes postmark, nor was the handwriting that of Mme. de Becherel: still, there was nothing peculiar in the appearance of the missive. It was in a neatly sealed square envelope, and there was nothing to prevent Robert from opening it at once, but he liked to divine the name of the writer by studying the superscription. This was a sort of mania with him, when he did not recognize a handwriting at the first glance, and he was sure that he had never seen this before.

It was not without something like a presentiment that he finally broke the seal, and drew out the letter, and he had scarcely glanced at the unfolded sheet when a peculiarity struck him. There was no address like "Sir," or

"My dear friend," standing out in bold relief, nor was there any signature below the ten or twelve lines that filled half the page.

His presentiments had not deceived him. It was indeed an anonymous letter, and it read as follows:

"Violette is a pretty girl, and Monsieur de Mornac is a shrewd man. They are enjoying themselves hugely at your expense. He has been her lover for a fortnight, and, of course, wishes her well, but he hasn't the slightest desire to marry her. He wants to find a man who is enough in love with the girl to do that. He has found him in you. You are a good match for her, and Monsieur de Mornac is your best friend. Marry without delay. You three will form a united household, and you will be the happiest of them all. Not this evening, however. This evening, after the performance, you will find yourself in a very unenviable frame of mind."

When Becherel looked up, after perusing this letter, the face he disclosed to view was so distorted that Jean asked him if he was ill.

"Leave me; I will dress without your assistance," replied Robert, brusquely. "I give you leave of absence for the whole evening, and when you return, you need not wait for me."

Jean disappeared, and his master sunk heavily into an arm-chair. The blow he had just received was as severe as it was unexpected, for Becherel had never had the shadow of a doubt of Violette's honor or M. de Mornac's loyalty. His first thought was that the accusation was absurd, and that the anonymous correspondent was a wretch whose calumnies should be treated with silent scorn, but, as usual, in such cases, upon reflection, there were circumstances that seemed to substantiate this charge.

Robert asked himself for the first time why the colonel,

who was essentially worldly in his nature, had suddenly taken such an interest in Violette, and so warmly espoused her cause. And why, since Cochard had engaged her, had M. de Mornac ceased to preach wisdom to his young friend? Why had he seemed, by his silence, to encourage him in his infatuation for Violette? Why had he refrained from any allusion to a scheme in which he had at first taken such an interest—the attempt to discover the orphan's relatives? To these questions, and others of a similar nature, Becherel could find no satisfactory response.

Fortunately it was not long before a reaction began, and he bitterly reproached himself for his weakness and credulity. How could he suppose for a moment that a brave soldier could so lower himself as to shamefully deceive the son of an old friend, and that a pure and artless girl could be guilty of such base treachery?

"Those wretches are the writers of this letter, unquestionably," muttered Becherel. "It is to them that I must look for redress: and I shall have it, for I know where to seek it."

This letter could in fact have come only from one of Violette's enemies—one of those who were plotting her ruin. There were at least three of these enemies—Herminia, Marcaudier, and Julia Pamatier—but Robert's suspicions fell chiefly upon Herminia, for the letter sounded like that of a jealous woman.

"This evening, after the performance, I will show this outrageous production to Violette," he thought, "and tomorrow to Monsieur de Mornac. I love them both, and I esteem them both too highly to conceal it from them. After they both have seen it, we will talk the matter over, and decide what measures we had better take to suppress the whole set."

Nevertheless, he read the letter over again, and he now noticed one sentence that had not struck him particularly at first.

"This evening, after the performance, you will find yourself in a very unenviable frame of mind."

This rather obscure prediction ended the letter like a sort of threatening postscript. What could it mean? Becherel after racking his brain for some time, finally concluded that it was merely an allusion to the hisses that were to assail the *débutante*.

The explanation was not altogether satisfactory, but he was unable to find a better one, so he finally placed the letter in his pocket-book and proceeded to dress himself.

His toilet completed, he sent Jean out for an open carriage, and ordered the coachman to drive down the Champs Elysées.

It was nearly sunset and the avenue was thronged with carriages, for the weather was delightful, and Robert had the pleasure of meeting the ladies of the Rue du Rocher who were returning from the Bois in their victoria. He very naturally refrained from bowing to them, but he fancied that the fair Herminia bestowed a defiant look on him as she passed, accompanied by a mocking smile; but this mute declaration of war made very little impression upon him, for he was already aware of that young lady's intentions. He continued his drive as far as the Arc de Triomphe, then returning by way of the Place de la Concorde, he dismissed his carriage and stepped into a neighboring restaurant to get his dinner.

A stay of an hour at a well-served table restored him to a more cheerful frame of mind and dispelled his few remaining doubts.

He became thoroughly convinced of the absurdity of the accusation, and firmly resolved not to give the unpleasant subject another thought until the next day.

It lacked only a few minutes of eight when he alighted from his carriage on the Boulevard du Temple in front of the theater in which Violette's fate was about to be decided —and his own as well.

The façade was a blaze of light. Long lines of glittering gas-jets festooned the cornices, and above the principal entrance the name of the operetta appeared in letters of flame.

It was a brilliant affair, this reopening of the Fantasies Lyriques, which had been closed for six months—and the pit and upper galleries were already crowded, though the fashionables were but just beginning to arrive. Private coupés were dashing up to the door laden with gentlemen in evening dress, so it was evident that the colonel had excited the curiosity of his friends among the club men to the highest pitch, since they had shortened their dinners for fear of missing the new diva's first appearance on the stage.

The operetta that was to retrieve Cochard's fortunes was the work of a talented composer, but the plot, unfortunately, was rather old-fashioned. It was a sort of spectacular drama—one of those that occur in an imaginary country ruled by a Queen Tohubohu XXV., or by a King Potiron XXXVI. The author of the libretto had entitled it the "Isle of the Birds," and the plot even surpassed other productions of the same kind in silliness and absurdity. It was a wonder that the composer had succeeded in finding pretty airs to accompany such nonsensical words.

Robert had heard all this through M. de Mornac, and also through Violette, who was not altogether pleased with her rôle, nor with her costumes, but who hoped that the music would redeem the words; and the colonel did not doubt it.

Becherel was less confident, however; and some remarks he heard as he entered the theater did not tend to reassure him.

"The 'Isle of the Birds,'" sneered one of the fashionable gentlemen who crowded by him. "What an absurd title! Why didn't they call it the 'Isle of the Partridges'?"

At any other time Robert would probably have agreed

with the speaker, but he was thinking only of Violette now; and anything said against the theater in which she was about to sing affected him like a personal insult.

The house was small, but it had been freshly painted and decorated; and none of its *habitués* had ever seen it graced by an equally brilliant audience. Robert had considerable difficulty in reaching his seat, which was in the third row of orchestra-chairs; and to do so he was obliged to crowd by Gustave Piton, who was sitting beside a fellow speculator and talking at the top of his voice as usual.

The former comrades exchanged no sign of recognition, however. The breach was final.

Several *loges* on the right of the stage were already occupied by fashionably dressed gentlemen who evidently belonged to the *upper ten*. These must be friends of the colonel, who had come to applaud; but on the other side of the stage were several members of the *demi-monde*, and Robert, who knew two or three of them by sight, strongly suspected them of being hostile to the *débutante*, and he could not doubt their intentions when he discovered Julia Pannetier among them in a gorgeous toilet.

In the dress circle there was a neutral assemblage, made up of respectable citizens attracted by the advertising that had been bestowed on the piece and the actress, a number of young men proud of witnessing a first performance, and a large number of ladies. Upon this now neutral party, which was much more numerous than either of the others, the success of the piece really depended, for it would fail or succeed according as these persons joined the friendly or hostile factions.

Becherel next devoted his attention to the occupants of the orchestra-chairs. Galimas sat enthroned in the first row—Galimas in full evening dress, with his hair elaborately curled.

Had he come to hiss Violette? Robert almost hoped so, for that would give him an excellent opportunity to revive

their old quarrel: but he suspected, on the contrary, that the broker intended to applaud, and in such a manner as to attract the attention of the young singer he had previously met in the Countess de Malvoisine's drawing-room.

Robert could not prevent him from doing so, but he mentally resolved to watch him, especially after the performance, and to compel him to leave if he ventured to lie in wait for Violette at the private entrance.

The colonel's predictions were verified. Robert was already jealous of his neighbors, and felt strongly inclined to watch the manner in which Violette's smiles were distributed among the audience.

The signal for the rising of the curtain was given. The orchestra began a lively overture and the curtain rose upon a stage setting intended to represent the Isle of the Birds. Upon the sea-shore in the shade of some superb tropical trees, sat his majesty, King Vulture I., surrounded by his court. His prime minister, the grand duke, and the chief of the powerful Owl tribe was kneeling before the throne awaiting his royal master's commands.

Queen Guinea Hen was seated beside her august spouse, and guards in the shape of red and blue peacocks, and maids of honor in the form of doves surrounded the royal couple. The costumes were original; the doves were all pretty girls, and the odd *mise-en-scène* was greeted with a murmur of approval.

The *débutante* was not on the stage: but Robert knew that she would soon make her appearance, and his heart throbbed violently.

It is needless to say that he hardly heard King Vulture when that winged monarch advanced to the front of the stage to explain the cause of his troubles to his wife and subjects. The music at his palace had been completely disorganized by the flight of his chief singer, a volatile Titmouse, who had just eloped with a disreputable Goldfinch.

A substitute must be found at once, and all the birds in the kingdom were commanded to give an immediate exhibition of their vocal powers, to the great dismay of Queen Guinea Hen, who feared that her royal husband would fall in love with the successful candidate.

Suddenly the door of one of the most conspicuous boxes opened noisily, and everybody turned to glance at the newcomers. The first to appear in sight was Mme. de Malvoisine, blazing with diamonds, and outrageously *décolleté*. Mlle. des Andrieux followed her closely, and they both seated themselves in the front of the box, spreading out their dresses and overturning chairs and foot-stools, to the great annoyance of the other spectators.

Becherel turned pale on seeing these ladies. He had almost hoped that they would not come, but now he could no longer blind himself to the fact that Violette would have their bitter animosity to contend with. He noticed, too, that instead of devoting their attention to the stage they began to gaze about the hall as if in search of the friends they had convoked to hiss the *débutante*. Herminia even distributed little nods here and there among the audience; and Becherel saw that the most friendly of all was addressed to Julia Pannetier, who sat enthroned in a box nearly opposite. Evidently there was a complete understanding between the two ladies; they had their devoted adherents, too, among the audience; and Herminia was looking for them through her lorgnette as a general reviews his soldiers before a battle to satisfy himself that each man is in his place.

In the meantime King Vulture had resumed his tirade, but it was soon interrupted by the hurried entrance of a sea-gull who announced that two unknown birds, that sung very sweetly, had just been driven by a tempest upon the rocky shore of the island. His majesty gave orders that they should immediately be brought into his presence, and four superb parrots left the group of guards only to

reappear almost instantly, escorting the strangers—a nightingale and a linnet.

The nightingale was, of course, the tenor of the Fantasies Lyriques, the idol of the Boulevard du Temple, who had formerly been on excellent terms with Julia Pannetier.

The linnet was the *débutante*, and a murmur of admiration greeted her entrance.

Her costume became her well, and though it was very modest, it displayed her beauty to great advantage. Her large dark eyes sparkled brilliantly from beneath her black velvet hood, a closely fitting gray bodice revealed her lithe and graceful form, and the skirt was just short enough to show a neat ankle and a dainty little foot incased in gray boots with tiny bird claws at the ends.

Led by the nightingale, she came forward with bowed head as befitted a linnet who had ventured into a strange land without a passport; but when King Vulture asked, "What brings you to my kingdom, young strangers?" she slowly lifted her head, and her eyes fairly illuminated the hall.

The leader of the claque had no need to give the signal for applause. It burst forth simultaneously in every part of the hall, and it lasted so long that Violette almost lost her self-possession. She had not expected such an ovation, and her joy overcame her.

Herminia turned green with envy, and Julia pretended to sneer.

Robert was delighted with this triumph, but he realized that it was, as yet, only a triumph of beauty; and he asked himself anxiously what effect her voice would produce—the clear and melodious voice that stirred the depths of his inmost heart whenever she spoke.

She had only two or three sentences to utter before she sang, and she said them without the slightest embarrassment.

She explained to the king that she had come from a dis-

tant land with the nightingale, the companion of her childhood; that they were traveling about the world together, earning their living by singing, and that having ventured upon the sea the vessel had been driven ashore by a terrible storm, and they had escaped death only by a miracle.

Then the good-natured king of the island, having asked her to give him a specimen of her vocal powers, she began her grand *morceau* of the first act, upon which her whole operatic career probably depended.

It was a highly original and very difficult *aria* that the composer had written expressly for her—a sort of *romanza* in which she related her misfortunes with a series of trills and runs in which she imitated the song of the bird she represented at the end of each couplet, and ending with a prayer addressed to Vulture I. "Pity, pity the poor linnet."

It was a grand success. The applause was so loud and so prolonged that the tenor who impersonated the nightingale was obliged to wait at least five minutes before he could sing in his turn. At last, the applause having abated, he had opened his lips to begin, when a loud hiss resounded, as a clap of thunder sometimes resounds in summer from a cloudless sky. It came from the upper gallery, that is to say, from one of the cheap seats, but Becherel trembled lest this hostile demonstration would encourage some of Violette's other enemies below to hiss her.

Everybody looked up to see who the offender was. Robert did the same, and had the unspeakable satisfaction of hearing cries of "Put the rascal out!" "Out with him!" and of seeing a shower of blows fall on the delinquent, who defended himself stoutly, but was finally hustled out.

Before he disappeared, however, Becherel had had time to catch a glimpse of him, and, to his profound astonishment, he fancied he recognized his groom, Jean, in the delinquent. He was probably mistaken, however. Jean had

asked his permission to remain out late this evening, it is true; but how very improbable it was that the boy would have paid to attend the theater instead of spending the evening in a wine-shop with his friend. Besides, even if he had taken it into his head to enter the Fantasies Lyriques, he certainly would not have ventured to interrupt the performance.

The audience seemed resolved to atone for this act of discourtesy, however, for the applause burst forth again, though it is needless to say that Herminia and her friend, Julia Pannetier, took no part in it.

On the contrary, they were eagerly gazing up in the gallery, as if hoping that the disorder there was going to continue, and that the young man's example would be followed by his neighbors.

Galimas had taken the *débutante's* part, and was now applauding in the most vehement manner, partly to show his enthusiasm, but principally to attract Violette's attention.

She was not even thinking of him, however; though she had not lost her wits, by any means. On the contrary, she waited with wonderful calmness for the confusion to subside, and her eyes meeting those of Robert, she smiled to reassure him.

It was a violation of their compact; but he was not offended. He thanked her, indeed, with a slight nod of the head, and the telegraphing stopped there.

The tenor now sung his air, which was less rapturously received than that of Violette, however. The king immediately appointed the linnet chief court-singer, and a stormy conversation ensued between Vulture I. and his queen, who was already jealous of the young stranger. The first act ended with a chorus by the doves, accompanying the refrain of a short song rendered by Violette with exquisite taste, and the applause it elicited was interrupted by no hostile demonstration this time.

The *débutante's* success was assured. Robert, who was overwhelmed with joy, went out to get a breath of fresh air, and the remarks he overheard in the corridor only increased his delight.

"The piece will run for at least a hundred nights," remarked one gentleman.

"Thanks to the *débutante*, for the piece itself is stupid. I never saw a prettier girl. And what an exquisite voice. It's as clear as crystal."

"A new diva is born to us," said a noted critic, gravely.

Becherel longed to embrace him, but he restrained himself, and ascended to the *foyer*, in the hope of meeting M. de Mornac, for the suspicions that had haunted him before he came to the theater were now entirely dispelled, and he no longer doubted that the anonymous letter was a tissue of impudent falsehoods and atrocious calumnies.

Seeing no familiar faces, however, he left the *foyer*, and was about to descend the stairs to resume his seat in the orchestra, when in the corridor leading to the first tier of boxes, he found himself directly behind a gentleman who had a lady on his arm. He did not recognize them at first, for he could see only their backs, but it seemed to him that this was not the first time he had heard the gentleman's voice.

He did not think of trying to listen to what they were saying, and it was almost in spite of himself that he heard a few words that aroused his suspicions.

"How enraged I am!" said the lady. "This affair will cause me an attack of illness, I do believe. Have the asses that applaud her no ears? A simpleton that doesn't know how to carry herself on the stage, and who flats atrociously! Men are idiots, upon my word!"

"It has taken you a long time to find it out, my dear," replied the gentleman, coolly. "I predicted all this, you remember."

"But you promised me that the piece should not go on to the end, recollect."

"Well, we have only reached the end of the first act, and there are three of them."

"The other two will be just like the first. They will yell themselves hoarse every time she sings, and throw bouquets at her and recall her a dozen times! And the famous cabal on which you counted. What about that? Not a hiss—yes, just one; and I know who gave that. He did it to please me; but the others don't dare to open their mouths for fear they'll be put out, chicken-hearted creatures! They are all cowards, even Florimond, the tenor. He swore to me that he would make her miss all her effects, and he is evidently as big a fool about her as all the rest."

"What else could you expect, my dear? She is very pretty, and has a great deal of talent, unquestionably. Mademoiselle des Andrieux pretends to the contrary; but—"

"So the girl is to succeed, I suppose, and all the newspapers will be chanting her praises to-morrow, and indulging in all sorts of odious comparisons. They will say that Cochard has done wisely to engage her in my place. If this is all you can say to console me, you had better go back where you came from, but I warn you that I shall not remain until the close of the performance. I have had enough of hearing them yell and clap their hands."

"Come, come: don't be foolish! You know very well that I don't intend this girl to take your place, if I can help it, and that I've a grudge against Cochard. To close his theater, and insure the failure of his new singer, I am ready to employ strong measures, if necessary—"

"What measures? What do you intend to do?"

"I will explain. In the first place, I—"

Robert did not hear the rest of the sentence, however, for they had reached the head of the staircase, and the crowd had divided into two currents, one of which continued in the direction of the boxes, while the other made its way down the rather steep staircase.

In less than ten seconds, Becherel found himself sepa-

rated from the lady and gentleman, and as they had seen him, and as he knew what to expect now, he did not think it worth while to follow them.

Chance had placed him directly on the heels of Marcaudier and his lovely Julia. He had had the pleasure of hearing them deplore Violette's success, and bitterly as they hated her, Robert did not believe that they had it in their power to do her any serious injury now.

It was with a tranquil mind, consequently, that Robert resumed his seat. Galimas was already in his, casting complacent glances around him.

Herminia and her mother were still occupying their box, and in a few moments Becherel saw Marcaudier enter it.

The ladies received Cash on Delivery very graciously. Herminia made him take a seat beside her, and was soon engaged in an animated conversation with him; but just then the leader of the orchestra rapped on his desk to announce the beginning of the second act and Robert forgot everything else in thinking of Violette.

When she reappeared upon the stage, there was such a frantic burst of applause that the ceiling seemed about to fall. The *débutante* had changed her costume; she was still dressed as a linnet, but as a court linnet—in silk and velvet, and with diamonds everywhere, on her neck, in her ears, and in her hair—the superb paste jewels furnished by the manager, and they enhanced her beauty wonderfully.

The second act was only one long triumph for her. She was on the stage all the time—now singing an aria that she rendered with charming *abandon* and perfect taste—now carrying on a lively conversation with Vulture I., who wished to seat her upon his throne—and with Queen Guinea Hen, who was plotting to deliver her into the hands of the owls, the executioners of the Bird Kingdom. Violette played her part with wonderful skill and vivacity. Her acting was as good as her singing. She was evidently born for the stage.

In the midst of the transports excited by the brilliant successes of the girl he loved, Becherel was disturbed by the sound of subdued talking on his right, and, turning, he was not a little surprised to see one of the ushers standing in the next aisle beckoning to him, and calling attention to a bit of paper that he held in his hand.

Irritated by this pantomime, the spectators in the same row with Robert were beginning to give unmistakable signs of displeasure.

The words, "Silence!" and "Hush!" uttered by some of the least patient among the spectators seemed to intimidate the young man, and, seeing that Becherel showed no inclination to move, he devised another way to fulfill the commission which had been intrusted to him, and for which he had doubtless been liberally paid.

Whispering a few words in the ear of the gentleman who occupied the seat nearest the aisle, he handed him the paper, and this gentleman passed it in turn to his next neighbor, who did the same, after glancing at the superscription, and so the note passed from hand to hand until it reached Becherel, who took it with some hesitation, and saw that it bore, not his name, but these words written in pencil:

"For the gentleman occupying seat No. 89 in the 3d row of orchestra-chairs."

Who could have sent this missive? Evidently some one who was in the hall or in the theater, Violette, perhaps; that is, unless the sender was Galimas or Marcaudier.

Becherel, who was rather alarmed, opened it, and had some difficulty in deciphering the following lines:

"Your mother has just arrived in Paris. It seems that she has written to you, but that you have failed to receive her letter. Finding no one at the station to meet her, or in your lodgings on the Boulevard Poissonnière, she sent

your porter to my rooms in search of you, and my valet advised him to come here. I have just seen him, and told him that you would return home immediately. Your mother is waiting for you in the porter's lodge, for he hasn't the key to your rooms, and your groom has gone out. You must not keep her waiting there. Hasten home without a minute's loss of time, and return as soon as you have installed her comfortably there. Tell her some story that will convince her it is necessary for you to absent yourself for an hour or two.

"You will be able to return to the theater before the close of the third act. Violette is counting upon your escort home, after the performance; in the meantime, she begs me not to leave her for an instant, so it is impossible for me to get away from the theater, even for a few moments. To-morrow, I will see Madame de Becherel, and speak a good word for you.

"Everything here is progressing as favorably as heart could desire. Your little friend's success is assured, and what a success! In less than two years she will be engaged as *prima donna* at the Grand Opera House. You ought to be well pleased. I am jubilant."

For a signature there was only an initial, an M, but this note could have come only from the colonel.

Well pleased? The poor lover was hardly that! The inopportune arrival of his mother had spoiled all the joy caused by Violette's triumph, but it is only just to say that he did not hesitate to follow M. de Mornac's advice.

His darling was on the stage, but the colonel would, of course, tell Violette why her lover had left in the middle of the act, and he knew her well enough to feel sure that she would forgive him for this apparent breach of courtesy toward her; so he rose to make his way to the door.

This was no easy matter, however, for he was some distance from the aisle, and he was obliged to crowd by at

least a dozen gentlemen. Indeed he was scarcely upon his feet before cries of "Down in front!" and "Sit down!" resounded behind him. Such a commotion was created that the actors paused for a moment, and Robert, before reaching the door, had the misery of seeing Violette turn pale and pause in the song she had just begun, but it was too late to recoil now, so he hastened on, followed by the black looks of the audience.

On reaching the street, he jumped into a carriage, promising the coachman a princely *pourboire* if he would drive like mad, and, stimulated by a hope of receiving the promised reward, the driver whipped up his horse so energetically that he was not ten minutes in reaching his destination.

Robert, without stopping to pay him, rushed into the hall, and was not a little surprised to find his porter seated by the fire, quietly reading his evening paper.

On being questioned by Robert, he declared that no lady had been there, that he knew nothing about M. de Mornac, and that he had not left his lodge that evening. Becherel was so sure of the truth of the statements contained in his letter that it was a long time before he could be convinced that some one had played a trick on him. When he did come to this conclusion he ceased to attribute the letter to the colonel, for M. de Mornac was a perfect gentleman, who would have scorned to play such a trick upon any one, and above all to drag in the name of Mme. de Becherel, for whom he entertained a profound respect.

Finally it occurred to him that the perpetrator of the joke might be his former friend, Gustave Piton. Gustave knew that Mme. de Becherel thought of visiting Paris, and was quite capable of one of those rough practical jokes so common among brokers; and the mere suspicion so exasperated Robert that he resolved to insult him at the very first opportunity, and as one might present itself that very

evening at the theater, he jumped into the carriage and ordered the driver to take him back to the Fantasies Lyriques with all possible speed, unmindful of the astonished face of his porter, who evidently suspected him of having suddenly lost his mind.

"There is one good thing about it," Becherel said to himself; "I shall not miss the third act, and my return will reassure Violette, who must be wondering what has become of me. After the performance I shall show this note to the colonel at the same time with the other anonymous letter. Two anonymous letters in one day are certainly a little too much. I no longer do him the injustice to believe that he wrote either of them, but I want to show them to him nevertheless."

Becherel reached the theater just as the *ent'racte* was ending, and hastened to his seat so as not to excite the displeasure of the audience a second time.

The countess and her daughter were in their box, but neither Marcaudier nor Gustave were anywhere to be seen. Julia Pannetier, on the contrary, was parading her charms in her *loge*, surrounded by her friends, and Robert fancied she wore a triumphant air; so triumphant in fact, that he began to wonder if Violette had not been hissed at the close of the second act.

He also perceived that the audience was murmuring because the curtain did not rise, and Robert, surprised at the delay, began to fear that there had been some accident. Certainly something of an extraordinary nature must be going on behind the curtain, for the musicians were all in their places only waiting for their leader to give the signal to begin.

Becherel noticed, too, that the fair Herminia was smiling maliciously, and exchanging signs with Julia Pannetier. These amiable creatures were doubtless rejoicing over a *contretemps* that would be almost sure to make the audience less favorably disposed toward the *débutante*, but

they showed no more astonishment than if this incident had formed a part of the evening's programme.

At last, just as Robert was beginning to feel seriously alarmed, the signal resounded. It was greeted with general applause, but as the curtain slowly rose the hubbub gave place, as if by enchantment, to a profound silence.

There appeared before the eyes of the breathless audience a superb stage setting, representing the palace of the king of the birds—a stage setting that cost poor Cochard a small fortune—but great was the surprise of the audience on beholding there neither Vulture I., surrounded by his guards, nor Queen Guinea Hen, attended by her maids of honor. Not an actor nor an actress was to be seen; the stage was deserted, and magnificent as was the palace, that alone would not satisfy the already irritated audience.

In a moment there advanced from one of the flies to the foot-lights a gentleman dressed in black, whose face wore the grave and contrite expression of a stage manager who is obliged to make an unpleasant announcement.

Robert, though greatly agitated, flattered himself that he must have come to ask the public's indulgence for an artist seized with a sudden hoarseness, and fondly hoped that the victim was not Violette.

The stage manager began as follows:

"Ladies and Gentlemen—We have the misfortune to announce that the management finds it absolutely impossible to continue the performance."

There were exclamations of disappointment, but before breaking into imprecations the crowd waited for an explanation.

"With an unpardonable forgetfulness of her duties as an artist, and of the respect she owes the public, Mademoiselle Thabor—"

"Oh, oh! what? What is the matter with her? Is she ill?" cried eager voices.

"Mademoiselle Thabor, dressed, and all ready to go on

the stage, hastily left the theater without warning any one, and in spite of our efforts, we have been unable to find her."

The bursting of a thunder-bolt in this handsomely decorated hall would not have caused greater confusion and excitement than this startling announcement. The close of it was drowned in the uproar, and very few persons among the audience heard that the management were willing to return the money unless purchasers of tickets would prefer to hear the rôle of the Linnet given by another actress.

The spectators rose *en masse*, and projectiles of every sort fell thick and fast upon the unfortunate stage manager, who had barely time to make his escape before the curtain fell. And really the audience had abundant grounds for dissatisfaction, for never before in Paris had an actress been known to disappear during a performance, above all during a first performance. Such things may happen occasionally in foreign countries or in distant provinces, but Parisians do not take kindly to jokes of this kind, and if the interior of the Fantasies Lyriques escaped demolition that night it was only because the kind Providence that watches over the destinies of theatrical managers interposed in Cochard's behalf. As it was, the policemen and guards on duty had all they could do to check the disorder, and prevent accidents while the public was boisterously vacating the hall.

Robert could think only of the missing Violette. What madness had seized her? Had she become frightened, or had she suddenly lost her reason? And above all, what had become of her? His first impulse was to fly to the assistance of the woman he loved. He forgot that he would arrive too late, so he rushed madly toward the door. By jumping over the seats he succeeded in reaching the corridor, and from there fought his way fiercely through the crowd to the street, which he reached without his overcoat, but not without many bruises.

He did not stop to hear what people were saying there. He knew where the private entrance was, and he rushed frantically toward that.

At the door he encountered a crowd of machinists and *figurants* who were anathematizing the artist whose flight threw them out of employment; but he forced his way through them by dint of blows that were returned with interest, and finally reached the greenroom where Cochard, his stage manager, Fiorimont, and several others were raving and tearing their hair like men demented.

The name of Marie Thabor was upon every lip, accompanied by very unflattering epithets, and when they saw Becherel appear—Becherel, who was a stranger to all of them—they rushed upon him to drive him from the room.

He shook them off, however, and said, turning to the manager:

"I am a friend of Colonel Mornac's. Where is Mademoiselle Thabor?"

"Go and ask your friend the colonel," replied Cochard, who was nearly frantic. "He left about a quarter of an hour before she did. He has met her perhaps. Ah! he can surely boast of having got me in a pretty scrape. I am ruined! He will lose a hundred thousand francs, but that doesn't do me any good."

"But what has happened?"

"This is what has happened. That creature thought it would be a fine joke to allow herself to be enticed away by some man in the audience, some enemy of mine undoubtedly. Ah, well! they shall both pay dearly for it, for I will find her, and bring suit against her. I will place my damages at three hundred thousand francs, and the gentleman shall pay it."

"What is the man's name?"

"How do I know? Do you suppose she made me her confidant? She had more than one lover, I suppose. You

must hunt for him in the crowd. But I have something else to do than stand talking with you. Clear out of here!"

Becherel, frantic with rage, was about to leap at the manager's throat when the colonel entered just in time to prevent it; but, unfortunately, Becherel's wrath was not appeased, but only diverted into a new channel.

"You must know where she is," he cried, savagely.

"What do you mean?" retorted the colonel, straightening himself up, "and why do you venture to address me in such a tone?"

"Violette left the theater with you."

"Are you mad?"

"And I call upon you to tell me where you have taken her."

"And I advise you to be silent."

"So you do not even deny that you are her lover?"

"This is really going a little too far, and if you think I will allow a boy like you to insult me, you—"

Robert, now quite beside himself, raised his hand to strike his supposed rival, but the colonel seized it in mid-air and checked the movement that was about to terminate in a blow.

"I consider it received," he said, coldly. "You will now come with me, and we will settle our differences. My dear Cochard," continued the colonel, without departing from his usual calmness, "I am truly sorry for what has happened, and I consider myself bound to indemnify you for the loss my protégé has caused you. Forgive me for having recommended her to you. I might have foreseen what has happened. The devil really seems to have had a hand in it. I had gone out for a few minutes to smoke a cigar when the girl decamped. Had I been here I could have prevented her from going, I am sure, but the mischief is done now, and I repeat that I will do my best to repair it."

"If she had only waited until after the close of the performance!" moaned the unfortunate manager; "but a fit of madness seems to have seized her. The woman who dressed her tells me that just as the girl was leaving her dressing-room to go on the stage a note was handed her. She read it, and walked straight on, without saying a word—only instead of entering the flies she went down into the street. The *concierge* saw her pass out, and two mechanics, who were smoking their pipes on the sidewalk, saw her enter a carriage that was waiting for her."

"And she entered it just as she was—in her stage costume. I just questioned them, and also the woman who dressed her. There is only one point upon which I am still in the dark, and that is the cause of her sudden departure."

"The cause! It is not difficult to guess that. She was the mistress of some enemy of mine, who offered her a large sum of money to play this trick on me. It was this same scoundrel who sent the carriage for her, and wrote to her that the moment had come for leaving the theater. He knew very well what he was doing, the villain!"

"Do you suspect any one in particular?"

"No, I have a host of enemies, but I have no idea which of them it was."

"We shall find out, never fear! and I will see that he is punished as he deserves. In the meantime, my dear fellow, you had better take the thing philosophically. I will see you again to-morrow."

Then turning to Becherel, who looked crest-fallen enough, M. de Mornac said, coldly:

"Now, sir, I have an explanation to ask of you. Will you have the goodness to follow me?"

The witnesses of this scene had not uttered a word, and they gladly beheld the colonel depart with the young stranger, whom they took for one of the missing artist's jilted lovers.

Robert followed the colonel in silence. He was begin-

ning to see that he had made a great mistake in accusing M. de Mornac, and to deeply regret his rashness.

"Sir," began the colonel, as soon as they reached the street. Then, with a sudden change of tone, he continued: "No, it was all very well to address you in that formal manner before those people, but it is not worth while when we are alone. I prefer to talk to you just as I am in the habit of doing. You will gain nothing by it, however, for your insolence is likely to cost you dear. I now propose to walk home by way of the boulevards, and you can accompany me as far as the Faubourg Poissonniere, as that will give me plenty of time to say what I have to say to you."

"As you please, colonel," replied Becherel, meekly.

"In the first place," remarked the colonel, "you are not to suppose that I bear you no ill will for your insult just now. I am more than twice your age, and you are the son of an old friend, but that will not prevent me from fighting with you. You need a lesson, and you shall have it. You will receive a visit from my seconds to-morrow. Now will you have the goodness to explain why you ventured to publicly accuse me of a most infamous act? The absurd idea that I was that girl's lover never entered your brain unaided. Some one must have insinuated as much to you."

"You are right. I received an anonymous letter, and—"

"I suspected as much. And you were fool enough to believe it!"

"I did not believe it at first; but during the performance I received another letter announcing that my mother had just arrived in the city, and that she was waiting for me at my rooms. I thought this note came from you."

"Indeed! Couldn't you see that the handwriting was not mine?"

"You have never written to me."

"That is true. Well, after you received this letter—?"

"I left the theater before the conclusion of the second act, and taking a carriage, drove home with all possible speed. On my arrival there my porter assured me that no one had called in my absence. I saw that somebody must have been playing a practical joke on me, so I drove back to the theater, where I arrived just as it was time for the third act to begin. You know the rest."

"No, I do not."

"Well, when the stage manager announced that Violette was missing I lost my senses, and rushed out of the hall and around into the greenroom, where I found Cochard, who told me that you left the theater about the same time that Violette did."

"And from that you unhesitatingly concluded that I had carried her off. You are rather rash in your conclusions, young man."

"I was so frantic with grief and rage that I had lost the power to reason."

"Then you are now convinced that you made a mistake, and that I had nothing to do with your divinity's disappearance, I suppose?"

"I am so sure of it that I beseech you to assist me in finding her."

"You certainly amuse me! You must be pretty well acquainted with your Dulcinea, and know whether she is capable of being enticed away by any man who is richer than yourself."

"No, I am sure she is not! I would stake my life upon her honor."

"You talk like the fond lover that you are! One can never answer for a woman. I am convinced, however, that this one, like yourself, has been made the dupe of some scoundrel who was resolved to ruin her. She, too, received a letter, it seems."

"Yes; and she saw me leave the theater while she was on the stage."

"Then all is explained. You were enticed out so she would notice your departure; and then she was probably informed that you had been run over by a carriage, or that you had broken your leg, or something of the kind, and wanted to see her immediately."

"And it was Marcaudier who wrote all three of the letters. I understand now why, in the one received before going to the theater, he told me that the evening was going to end badly for me."

"It is quite probable that he was the writer; but he certainly had accomplices—male as well as female. First, Herminia and her mother, and also some gentleman who had taken a fancy to Violette."

"Yes, Galimas!" exclaimed Robert. "He was in the hall. But what makes you think so?"

"Because Marcaudier, though he is certainly a scoundrel, did not entice Violette away in order to murder her. He must have made a bargain with Galimas to take the young lady off his hands, and they both hoped that she would allow herself to be tempted by the broker's brilliant offers. They are even capable of keeping her a prisoner until she decides; but they will have to release her some day or other unless she concludes to accept the dishonorable proposals of this rich speculator."

"Oh, colonel!"

"Not that I think she will; but it is well to be prepared for the worst; and if that should come to pass there will be nothing left for you to do but forget her. But if, on the contrary, she refuses, they will find themselves obliged to release her; and in that case she had better enter no complaint against them. You will even be the first to recommend silence. I even think that the best thing you can do for the present is to remain perfectly quiet."

"And you will do nothing. You will allow—"

"I will make inquiries about all these people. A former non-commissioned officer in my regiment now holds

an important position in the secret service, and through him I can find out all about this Marcaudier and the capitalist who backs him—that pretended uncle of Herminia, whom no one has ever seen. When I have secured this information I will not refuse to lend you a helping hand, though you must not forget that you owe me reparation for your insult just now! I shall content myself with wounding you in the arm, however, so you will get off quite easily, after all. But I see that you lost your overcoat in the crowd. It's as cold as Greenland; and I don't want you to have an attack of pleurisy. I have said all that I have to say to you, so you had better take a carriage and get home as fast as you can. You will hear from me to-morrow."

Robert watched M. de Mornac walk away without daring to offer him a hand. After doubting the loyalty of his best friend, he now began to doubt Violette's innocence.

CHAPTER VIII.

After her arrival at the theater, about the same time that Robert de Becherel was finishing his dinner on the Champs Elysées, Violette passed successfully through all the tribulations that await a *débutante*. She endured with heroic patience the encouragement of the manager—encouragement that is entirely superfluous at the last moment—the recommendations of the author and composer to take particular care about such and such a passage in her rôle—the premature and rather ironical congratulations of the other performers, the grumbling of the costumer, who positively insisted upon shortening the skirt of her dress, and the slowness of the hair-dresser, who seemed determined never to finish her task.

The colonel had had the good sense to hold himself aloof until she left her dressing-room at the call of the prompter.

and even at that trying moment he uttered only a few affectionate words, so she retained her presence of mind to such a degree that she instantly recognized Herminia in her *loge*, and Robert in one of the orchestra-chairs.

The applause had not agitated her, nor the hiss that resounded from the upper gallery; and at the conclusion of the first act she was the recipient of an enthusiastic ovation in the greenroom; an ovation in which M. de Mornac took part. But she did not seem unduly elated, and her modesty won all hearts, even those of the other performers.

The next act passed off equally well, and her success was no longer doubtful, when Violette saw Robert rise and hurriedly leave the hall. Then, for the first time, she became slightly agitated; but the curtain fell to the sound of enthusiastic "bravas!" which failed to calm the anxiety of the *débutante*, however, for she could not imagine why Robert had left the theater so suddenly, and she already began to feel a presentiment of impending misfortune.

She was anxious to confide her misgivings to Colonel de Mornac, but that gentleman was nowhere to be found. He had just left the theater, telling Cochard that he was going out to smoke a cigar, but that he would return before the curtain rose for the third act, so Violette finally consented to go up to her dressing-room.

She was just leaving it when one of the call-boys handed her a note which she tore open with a trembling hand, and which contained only these lines, written in pencil, like the communication Becherel had received:

"Robert has just met with a serious accident. I have had him taken to the house of a lady friend. He insists upon seeing you. Come immediately. My carriage is in waiting to take you to him."

The trap was apparent, and yet the girl allowed herself to be caught in it.

She did not doubt for a moment that this message came from M. de Mornac. She did not ask herself how the ac-

cident could have occurred, or how the colonel had happened to be on hand just at the right moment to pick up the injured man. She thought only of hastening to the bedside of the man she loved, and to see him once more before he died, if die he must.

It did not even occur to her that she ought to inform the manager of her intentions. What good would it do? He would only try to detain her; and she was firmly resolved to respond to M. de Mornac's summons.

Rushing down into the street, she was met only a few steps from the private entrance by a servant in neat livery, who said, lifting his hat respectfully:

"The carriage is here; and if mademoiselle will have the goodness to follow me—"

"What has happened to Monsieur de Becherel?" interrupted Violette.

"A terrible accident, mademoiselle. He was knocked down and trampled upon by a pair of runaway horses. He was picked up unconscious, and they fear that his leg is broken."

"Where is he?"

"Only a short distance from here, mademoiselle. Monsieur de Mornac witnessed the accident and had Monsieur de Becherel taken to the house of a lady who resides on the Quai de Valmy. We shall be there in five minutes."

Violette had never heard of the Quai de Valmy, but she knew that the colonel had a large circle of acquaintances, and supposing that the carriage and servants were his, she entered the well-appointed coupé which was standing a little way off without the slightest reluctance.

The footman closed the door, climbed upon the box beside the driver, and the horse started off on a swift trot through the Rue d'Angoulême, in the direction of the Canal Saint Martin.

Just before he came to the bridge the coachman turned to the left, and Violette saw, without being really conscious

of the fact, that she was rolling along a nearly deserted quay, lined with warehouses and a few dimly lighted dwellings. She could think only of Robert, and it seemed to her that the horse, though he was really moving at a very rapid pace, only crawled.

Soon the carriage passed under an arch and into a courtyard, but so swiftly that Violette had only time to catch a glimpse of a two-story house and a tall gate that closed noisily as soon as the carriage passed.

The footman opened the door, assisted the young lady to alight, ushered her into a brilliantly lighted hall, and said:

"Will mademoiselle have the goodness to walk upstairs?"

Violette needed no urging, but rushed up the white marble steps in breathless haste. On reaching the landing she saw an open door directly in front of her.

She crossed the threshold, and was not a little surprised to find herself in a cozy dining-room that seemed intended only for a *tête-à-tête* repast, it was so small, and contained so few chairs.

A Venetian glass chandelier, in which all the candles were lighted, hung over an exquisitely decorated table, where wines that rivaled the topaz and amethyst in hue sparkled in cut-glass decanters.

This dainty feast spread in a house where a dangerously injured man was lying astonished Violette, and a vague feeling of alarm took possession of her.

Hastily traversing the dining-room, she entered first an exquisitely furnished salon and then a dainty boudoir, hung with pale-blue satin.

All these rooms were brilliantly lighted, but they were empty.

"The servant was mistaken," thought Violette. "They must have carried Monsieur de Becherel to a room on the floor above."

So, returning to the hall, she hurried upstairs. There

she found more lights and another open door leading, this time, into a library handsomely furnished in ebony and gilt. Violette did not pause even to glance at the richly bound volumes that filled the book-cases, but hastened on into a bed-chamber, which was no more reassuring in its aspect. There were mirrors everywhere, even at the foot of the bed, which stood in a lace-draped alcove. Opening out of this chamber was the bath-room, a marvel of luxury. The bath-tub, table and vases were of onyx; the toilet articles were ivory or silver.

The very sight of this retreat convinced Violette that she had been basely deceived, and she now thought only of making her escape before the man who had decoyed her here presented himself. But how was she to do it? She had heard the *porte-cochère* close behind her, and she felt sure that the scoundrel's hireling would refuse to open the gates at her bidding.

She ran to the window to call for help, but unfortunately the window opened upon an inner court-yard where she saw only the coupé that had brought her here. The horses had already been unharnessed, and the coachman had disappeared.

"Ah, well! my dear, how do you like your new quarters?" asked a voice behind her.

Violette started as if a serpent had stung her, and, turning, found herself face to face with a man she both hated and despised.

Galimas was standing before her, eying her insolently, with his hat on his head and a smile on his lips, an evil smile that made the girl shudder.

"What the deuce are you doing there by that open window?" continued the broker. "You will certainly catch cold. Close it, and come and take a seat in this easy-chair. You will be much more comfortable, and we can have a talk. I have a host of things to say to you, for we have not met since you left Madame de Malvoisine's."

"Leave the house!" said Violette, in a voice husky with emotion.

"Leave the house? Yes; I acknowledge that you have a perfect right to order me out, as you are in your own house. Yes, mademoiselle; this house and all it contains shall be yours to-morrow. You have only to go to my notary and sign the deed that puts you in possession of a piece of property that cost three hundred thousand francs, and that is really worth a good deal more—for it was purchased, at a great sacrifice, of a bankrupt merchant who built it and furnished it for his lady-love. The neighborhood is not all that could be desired, perhaps; but, as you will have your horses and carriages, there will be nothing to prevent you from going to the Bois every day. You will have an allowance of five thousand francs a month besides; but you know my intentions, as you have received my letters."

"So it was you who wrote to me?"

"Of course. I am surprised that you didn't guess the truth at once. There are not many men in these days who offer a woman a handsome establishment and an income of sixty thousand francs—a fortune in itself, but you are worth it."

"Wretch!" muttered Violette.

"What! you call me hard names? You make a great mistake, my dear. But perhaps you are angry with me for having enticed you away in the middle of the performance. A nice trick I played on your manager, didn't I? Well, you needn't worry about it. If you want to try the stage again, you can secure a dozen engagements on much better terms than those offered by that sneaking Cochard. And I sha'n't oppose you, I promise you that, for you have an immense amount of talent; and it would really be a pity not to profit by it. Besides, I understand women, and know that they must be allowed to follow their inclinations in such matters. You are a born actress, so you

ought to follow your vocation. I only ask a little gratitude. I shall not be exacting, by any means, and when you come to know me better, you will see that I'm not a bad fellow at heart, and you will get used to me. Come, don't be so shy!" he continued, coming a step nearer. "One would suppose you were afraid of me."

"If you come a step nearer, I will dash my brains out on the stone pavement below."

Violette's tone and gesture convinced Galimas that this was no idle threat: so he paused, though he did not yet acknowledge himself defeated. He told himself that he had to deal with a very excitable nature, and that if he attempted to carry matters with a high hand he would only exasperate Violette: so it would be much better to try to win her by gentle means.

"Be calm, I entreat you, mademoiselle," he said, in an entirely different tone. "You misunderstand my intentions, I assure you."

"Then will you allow me to leave this place?" asked Violette, coldly.

"Leave this room? Why, certainly. I would even like you to see that the home I have prepared for you is well arranged. It will please you, I am sure."

"I wish to leave this house, and immediately."

"You are not a prisoner here, I assure you. To-morrow you will be perfectly free to go and come as you please. But at this hour of the night it would be a positive crime to allow you to depart. Remember that we are on the banks of the Canal Saint Martin, in a locality infested by vagabonds, who would certainly molest you."

"That makes very little difference to me. I would rather be murdered than remain here."

"You are very hard on me: but I bear you no ill-will, for I am sure you will think twice before deciding upon a step that you would certainly regret afterward. The night brings counsel, you know; so make up your mind to spend

it in your own house. I did hope to take supper with you here, but if my presence annoys you, I will leave you—and return to take breakfast with you to-morrow morning, if you will allow me. When you feel inclined to rise, you will only have to ring, and your maid will answer the summons. I thought it best to give her leave of absence this evening. You will find some dresses in the wardrobe to make a selection from, for I presume you won't care to remain dressed as you are, though your costume is extremely becoming."

Violette had not expected to hear this man talk to her in this strain. It was very evident that he did not believe she could possibly refuse the brilliant destiny he offered her. This unscrupulous broker was not in the habit of meeting women he could not dazzle with his gold, and sure of triumphing eventually, he very willingly consented to wait; so Violette asked herself if she would not do well to take advantage of the respite offered her, and seek a means of escape in the meantime.

"And now, to convince you that I am not quite so bad as I appear to be, I will bid you good-evening," continued Galimas. "We will resume this conversation to-morrow morning, and with me, I repeat, you will be as free as air, for I am satisfied that you would not abuse your freedom. It is agreed, is it not?"

"I am grateful to you for going, but I will promise nothing," replied Violette, proudly.

"I ask no promise from you," answered Galimas. "I know what promises are worth. I would rather rely upon your voluntary conversion."

And without waiting for a reply, he left the room, closing the door behind him, but without locking it, for Violette heard no key turn in the lock.

The poor girl's first impulse was to prevent his return by pushing the bolt, but she searched in vain for this protecting bolt. There was none.

In despair, she ran to the window. It was her only resource, not for flight, for she would certainly be killed if she attempted to leap from it.

What had become of the coarse *parvenu* who was aping the customs of the *grands seigneurs* of the old *régime?* Had he left the house to give her time for reflection, or was he hiding in some corner of this hateful house, like a tiger that is only watching for an opportunity to spring upon his prey?

She little suspected that he had gone to consult his accomplice.

Galimas was utterly corrupt at heart. He belonged to that class of wealthy men who firmly believe that money is the real king of the world, and he never hesitated to gratify a caprice, whatever it might cost him. And why should he hesitate, when he did not believe there was such a thing as virtue? Still, he had his doubts in the present instance. No woman had ever gone so far as to threaten to throw herself out of the window before in order to rid herself of his presence; besides, he had never been obliged to abduct any one by force before. And, though he had allowed himself to be persuaded into these rather violent measures, he had no idea of compromising himself or of getting himself into serious difficulty with the authorities; so before going any further he wanted to know what the originator of this conspiracy thought of the state of affairs.

This adviser was in the basement, waiting for Galimas to report. This basement contained the kitchen pantries and servants' rooms, but as the household of the new mistress was not yet organized, the allies ran no risk of being disturbed.

"Well?" asked Marcaudier, on seeing the broker appear.

"Well, I haven't been able to extort even the vaguest kind of a promise from her. She talks of nothing but killing herself. Of course, I don't believe she means it, but it's not a very promising beginning."

"I warned you, remember."

"Oh! she'll become tamer by and by."

"Are you sure of it?"

"Not absolutely; and if I thought she would always be as savage as she is now—"

"What would you do?"

"I would let her alone. I've no desire to have my eyes scratched out, and I shall be sure to if this girl's mood doesn't change."

"But in that case you will have to release her."

"Of course; though I should hate most mortally to do it, for she's as pretty as a pink: but I can't detain her by force."

"And do you fancy that would be the end of the matter?"

"Why not? She would have no special cause to complain of me, I am sure."

"I differ with you. You have done her a very serious injury. She was on the eve of a great success, and now her career is ruined."

"Nonsense! her mysterious disappearance will only serve as an advertisement."

"And how about Cochard? What will he say when he finds out that it was you who carried off the *prima donna* who was to retrieve his fallen fortunes?"

"I'm not afraid of Cochard. He hasn't a penny."

"And you're not afraid of the girl's lover, I suppose? Or, perhaps, you think she'll refrain from telling him what has occurred?"

"That country bumpkin I met at Madame de Malvoisine's? No; I'm not afraid of him. If he thinks he has any just cause of complaint, I'll fight him; besides, we have an old score to settle."

"Oh, the fellow won't fight with you. He will go to his friend, Colonel Mornac, who is a very influential man, and they will call on the government attorney and enter a formal complaint against you. Violette is not of age, rec-

ollect. She is certainly not over nineteen, and the Penal Code punishes the forcible abduction of a minor very severely. You're almost sure to bring up in the Court of Assizes."

Galimas was beginning to be thoroughly frightened, but he was so angry that he replied, savagely:

"This is a fine way for you to talk, upon my word! If I've got myself into a scrape it is all your work. I hadn't even thought of such a thing as abducting the girl. I only intended to send an intermediary to her to try to convince her that it would be better to live a life of ease than earn her bread by giving music-lessons. Then you come and suggest that I resort to a highly romantic expedient that will be sure to make an impression on the girl's imagination, you say. You even offer to carry the scheme into execution. It was you who wrote the anonymous letter; it was you who furnished the carriage and servants. And now you talk to me about the Court of Assizes. It's a nice time to do that, truly. You had better tell me what I must do to escape it, for if I go there you'll go too."

"There is no need of either of us going there, if you will only listen to me. But, first, let me prove to you that I was sincere in advising you to abduct the girl. I have never concealed the fact that I had my reasons for wishing to separate her from this Monsieur de Berel, who is so much in love with her that he really thinks of marrying her. I should have accomplished my object, dear sir, if she had decided to accept your proposals. I hadn't much hope of it, however. I knew her too well. But I said to myself: Let us make the experiment. When she sees the beauties of the house on the Quai de Valmy she will succumb, perhaps. Well, we have tried the experiment. What do you think of it? Do you honestly believe that you will ever succeed in overcoming this prude's scruples?"

"I'm afraid not."

"So you think of allowing the bird to escape from the

cage, and that is precisely what I don't want to do. I want also to prevent the possibility of her injuring us."

"But how? I hope you don't think of wringing her neck?"

"Of course not. Only brutal idiots resort to such measures as that."

"I wouldn't let you do it, if you wanted to. But what is your plan?"

"I want to rid you of her by gentle means, but effectually. You can not possibly do it without my assistance."

"I want to know the means you intend to employ."

"Why? So that you may share the responsibility with me. It would be greatly to your advantage for me to act alone. You certainly don't think me fool enough to burden my conscience with a murder? I'll take entire charge of the whole affair. All you will have to do is to keep quiet, and send about their business any persons who take it into their heads to question you. No one saw Violette enter the house; at least no one but the men who brought her here; and I can depend upon them, so the rôle you have to play is not a difficult one. You must go upstairs again and tell the young lady that on reflection you have decided not to detain her against her will, and that she is consequently at liberty to leave immediately. You can even offer to take her home in a carriage. She will refuse your offer, but she will accept her freedom. While you are talking with her I will go and open the *porte-cochère* so she can leave whenever she pleases."

"But—"

"Oh, don't insist upon an explanation. I sha'n't give you any. You can accept my offer or not, as you choose. If my proposal doesn't please you, I'll decamp and leave you to settle the affair with your prisoner as best you can."

"The deuce take her and you, too," growled Galimas. "I'll say a word or two to her, and then—well, I'll leave the whole matter in your hands."

"That is the best thing you could possibly do, my dear fellow. Now I will leave you. After your interview with the fair damsel you can remain here or return home, as you prefer. You won't see me again to-night, but to-morrow, at the Bourse, I'll give you some news that will ease your mind, I trust."

As he spoke, the originator of the conspiracy took leave of Galimas, who made no attempt to detain him. The broker had had quite enough of this unpleasant predicament, and was anxious to put an end to it without delay, so he went up to the room where he had left Violette.

On entering the apartment where the girl was waiting for her destiny to be decided, Galimas saw that she was still standing close to the window; so, without making any attempt to approach her, he said:

"I have reflected, mademoiselle, and I do not wish you to retain an unpleasant recollection of me. You would do well to remain here until to-morrow morning, but you are not obliged to do so. You are at perfect liberty to leave this house. You would not make use of my carriage, I know, if I offered it; you would prefer to leave on foot. It would be an act of the greatest imprudence, though. Permit me, however, to tell you that you will probably find a carriage on the boulevard. Permit me also to add that I am entirely at your service, whatever happens. I should deem myself very fortunate if you should write me that you had changed your mind. My address is No. 31 Rue du Quatre Septembre."

And Galimas disappeared without even giving Violette time to thank him. She could not understand why this man had so suddenly abandoned his pursuit of her; but this was no time to deliberate, for he might change his mind, so it was advisable to take advantage of this opportunity. She listened and heard him descend the stairs. When the sound of his footsteps had died away, Violette

waited a few minutes longer in order to allow him ample time to leave the house.

After five minutes, which seemed well-nigh interminable, she decided to make the venture; and slipping out into the brilliantly lighted hall, she reached the vestibule without meeting any one.

The *porte-cochère* was standing open. She rushed out and found herself on the deserted quay. She did not know where she was, or which way to go: but the all-important thing was to place a long distance between her and the house she had just left, so she began to run with all her might, keeping close to the houses. The black waters of the canal terrified her: but she said to herself that she should soon reach a more frequented locality or meet a carriage, so she hastened on.

After a few minutes she heard the sound of carriage-wheels behind her, and glancing back she saw a fiacre approaching at a very leisurely pace. If the vehicle was empty it was certainly Heaven that had sent it to her, she thought.

She paused and waited until the shabby vehicle, driven by a coachman who seemed to be more than half asleep, overtook her; then darting out into the street she called loudly to the driver, who was muffled nearly to the eyes in the big cape of his old-fashioned overcoat.

"I'll give you ten francs to take me to the Rue de Constantinople!" she cried.

"All right, my little lady," replied the man, stopping his horses. "I'll have you there in less than no time. Jump in!"

Violette did not need to be told twice. She opened the door, and bowing her head, hastily sprung into the carriage.

Before she had even time to seat herself, however, she was seized by strong hands and a large leather gag was applied to her mouth, while some one tied her feet and hands

with ropes: and as if to increase the horrors of this abduction, so much more frightful than the other, her eyes were immediately bandaged with a large handkerchief.

All this was done with marvelous dexterity and rapidity; and the perpetrators of the outrage did not utter a word.

There were at least two of them; one who was sitting beside her and the other opposite, on the front seat of the carriage.

Violette was utterly unable to move or to cry out: indeed, it was only with the greatest difficulty that she could breathe.

She felt that she was lost, and she commended her soul to God, for she had retained all her clearness of perception, and she asked herself what these wretches intended to do with her. Why had they subjected her to this fresh outrage when she had been completely in their power before, and where were they taking her?

The horses were now moving at a rapid trot, making the vehicle clatter and bound as it traversed the badly paved street: but soon the jolting became much less violent, and Violette knew that they must be on the asphalt: but it was impossible for her to tell the direction in which they were going. She thought, however, that they must be taking her outside the city limits to murder her in the open fields or throw her into the Seine.

Death had no terrors for her: but she did not want to die without seeing Robert again; nor could she bear the idea that he might suspect her of having consented to the abduction, as actresses sometimes suddenly abandon the stage to follow some Russian prince who is ready to cover them with gold.

And this was the fate that inevitably awaited her, for she could not hope that Robert would ever guess the truth?

It would be impossible to describe her sufferings during this terrible drive which, although comparatively short, seemed to her a century long.

At last the carriage stopped, the door was opened, and Violette was taken out and carried across the pavement by the head and feet exactly as if she had been a bale of merchandise.

She knew that she was taken into a house—for the air was much warmer—but only to be carried directly through it, and by the grating sound of gravel under the feet of her captors she suspected that they next traversed a garden walk.

Any doubts on this point were speedily dispelled, for the branches of a shrub wet with dew grazed her face, and the smell of freshly stirred earth greeted her nostrils. She heard, too, the fluttering of a suddenly awakened bird.

Then the air became warmer again. Her captors had left the garden and were now slowly ascending a staircase. The man who held her head was walking backward, and Violette received a slight jolt at each step. She had the presence of mind to count them; there were twenty-two of them.

On the twenty-second they paused and set her upon her feet without letting go their hold, however.

A key grated in a lock, a door creaked as it turned upon its hinges, and Violette was gently pushed forward by one of her persecutors.

Bound as she was, it was only with the greatest difficulty that she could walk at all. She did manage to take a few steps, however, and almost immediately some one unbound her ankles and then her hands.

She waited for them to remove the bandage from her eyes and the gag from her mouth, but she waited in vain. Again she heard the door turn upon its hinges, and the key grate in the lock.

Her persecutors had departed.

In what kind of a place had they left her? Why had they not killed her then and there? Could it be that they were reserving her for a still more horrible fate, that of

slow starvation? She could not implore their compassion, for they had disappeared. An oppressive silence reigned around her—the silence of the tomb—and in this frightful solitude she could distinctly hear the beating of her own heart.

There was nothing to prevent her from removing the gag from her mouth and the bandage from her eyes now, but she dared not. She feared some appalling sight would meet her gaze: for the air she inhaled was so foul and nauseating that she asked herself if she had not been placed in some charnel house.

But however horrible her surroundings might be, she could endure this suspense no longer, so she slowly began to remove the gag. She succeeded finally, though not without considerable difficulty, for it was held in place by wires behind the ears like a fencer's mask. Then she had only to remove the bandage from her eyes. This done, she opened them, but could see nothing, the darkness that surrounded her was so profound.

Where was she? She could not imagine: and she dared not make any attempt to explore her dungeon for fear that any step she took might bring her to an open trap-door and precipitate her into a pit below.

She said to herself that she could not be very far from the door by which she had entered, and that there was consequently no danger that the floor would give way beneath her feet if she moved in that direction, so she retreated instead of advancing.

Soon she reached the wall, and leaning against it she listened breathlessly, for she fancied she heard a strange sound—a faint moaning, that ceased only to begin again a moment afterward. Her blood curdled in her veins at the thought that some other human being was languishing in this dungeon; her limbs gave way beneath her, and she sunk upon the floor.

Her physical strength was exhausted, and her mental

powers were beginning to desert her. The blood rushed to her head, and she gradually relapsed into a state of partial unconsciousness. Robert's image appeared before her; she fancied she could hear him cursing the perfidious creature who had deserted him to follow the infamous Galimas. Robert must have noticed the scoundrel's maneuvers during the performance, and supposed that he had won Violette with his promises of gold; and now, Robert, instead of making an attempt to find her, was swearing that he would never set eyes on her again.

This thought broke the poor girl's heart, and deprived her of her only hope. There was nothing left for her but death now, and she longed for it with all her heart.

At last sleep came; the leaden slumber that follows great crises.

How long she slept she never knew; but when she woke she was utterly unable to recall what had passed. She opened her eyes, but only to instantly close them again.

Day had dawned, and the light that stole through the windows above dazzled her, dim as it was.

Suddenly she fancied she felt some one's breath upon her cheek. The idea aroused her from her lethargy, and opening her eyes they met those of a woman who was kneeling beside her—a woman whose face was almost touching hers, and whose lips were murmuring incoherent words.

A cry of astonishment escaped Violette, and she hastily raised herself upon one elbow; still the woman did not move, but continued to devour her with her eyes.

"Who are you?" asked the girl, in a trembling voice "Are you a prisoner like myself?"

She received no reply; but this time she heard the words the stranger was repeating:

"Simone!" she was saying. "Simone, where are you?

"Simone! that is my name!"

"That is false! Simone is dead. You are saying this

just to try me—like that man who came here and tried to get me away."

"But what if I should be the Simone you believe dead?"

"You look like her, but you are not Simone."

"What would you do if you should find her again?"

"What would I do? How dare you ask me that? Do you not understand that she for whom I mourn was my daughter?"

"Your daughter!" exclaimed Violette, beginning to scrutinize the face of the stranger in her turn. Those features, haggard with suffering, aroused no recollection in her mind. They were entirely strange to her, but it seemed to her that she had heard this sweet and well modulated voice in the days of her childhood.

"Now tell me your name in your turn," she said at last.

"My name? I have forgotten it. I try to recall it sometimes, and there are days when it suddenly recurs to me."

"Well, try now, I beseech you."

The woman bowed her head upon her hands, and sat for a long time silent and motionless.

Then suddenly straightening herself, she said:

"Years ago they used to call me Bertha."

Violette turned pale. She, too, had suddenly recalled the name.

"Did you live in a sea-port town?" she asked.

"Yes, I lived near the sea. But how did you know that?"

"You lived in Havre, perhaps?"

"No, in Ingouville."

Violette knew enough of geography to be aware that the pretty village of Ingouville was in the suburbs of Havre

"Did you live near the water?" she asked, quickly.

"Yes, we could look on the sea from the windows of our house."

"And there was a large garden full of flowers, was there not?"

"Yes. Oh, those flowers! I loved them so. I wonder if there are any flowers now?"

The tears rose to Violette's eyes.

"You had a daughter, had you not?" she asked.

"Yes; and I idolized her, but they took her from me."

"Who took her from you?"

"I do not know. She was stolen. She was playing in the garden one evening; I left her for a moment, and when I returned, she was gone."

"And you have never seen her since?"

"No, never. My grief at her loss destroyed my reason. They shut me up in a ship, and I was on the sea a long time."

"And afterward?"

"I can not remember what happened afterward. Where are we?"

"You are in Paris. That is all I know, for I, too, was dragged here last night by force, after my captors had bandaged my eyes. Your daughter was taken from you; my mother was taken from me. I was scarcely four years old when I was found asleep on a bench in a public park in Rennes—a long way from the city of Havre, where I was born."

"Why do you say that you were born in Havre?"

"Because I am sure that I was. I recollect that my nurse carried me out on a long pier—and that garden full of flowers at Ingouville. I can see it yet."

The stranger listened with breathless eagerness, and her eyes sparkled with extraordinary brilliancy. It was evident that both intelligence and memory were returning.

Suddenly she sprung toward Violette and seized the frightened girl by the fair shoulder, for the corsage of the costume she wore was moderately *décolleté*.

"This mark?" demanded the recluse, touching a small dark spot that marred the whiteness of the soft skin.

"I have had it ever since I was born," replied Violette.

"My daughter! for you are indeed my daughter," exclaimed the poor woman, smothering her with kisses.

For some minutes the mother and daughter embraced and wept over each other in silence.

"Ah! I felt sure that you were my mother," exclaimed Violette. "It is God that has united us."

"Yes, we will die together—for it must have been with the intention of killing you that they threw you into this prison. Do you know who your persecutors are? Tell me all about your life. What were you doing when they seized you, and why did they treat you as they have?"

"I was reared by charity, in a convent. Afterward I became a music-teacher in a boarding-school near Paris, and afterward companion in the household of a lady called the Countess de Malvoisine."

Violette paused. She could not bear to tell her mother that she had afterward sung in a theater, though she fully expected to be questioned about the singular costume she wore. But the recluse did not seem to notice it. Since she had been pining in Marcaudier's prison house the unfortunate woman had had time to forget how young girls usually dress.

Nor did the name of Malvoisine seem to make any impression upon her. She had never heard it before evidently.

"Listen," she said, pressing Violette to her heart, "I do not know what they intend to do with you. Perhaps they intend you to perish of cold and hunger. I have managed to endure these privations for years, but you could not endure them long, so we will try to make our escape. A man came here one night, not very long ago. He entered by way of the roof. He wanted to save me, but I refused to go with him. I thought that my perse-

cutors had sent him here to set a trap for me. He showed me a paper on which I had written your name, and which I had thrown through that window up there. I hope he will come again; but if he does not, we shall perhaps be able to make our escape without his assistance."

"It must have been Robert," thought Violette. "I understand now why he promised to restore my mother to me about a fortnight ago."

CHAPTER IX.

After his brief conversation with the colonel, Robert de Becherel returned home in a state of mind closely bordering on frenzy.

He no longer suspected M. de Mornac of treachery, but he still doubted Violette, and the mere thought that she might have allowed herself to be tempted by the proposals of a man like Galimas caused him the most poignant suffering; and, though he tried hard to convince himself that such a thing was an impossibility, he did not succeed.

Very unfortunately, too, he found himself condemned to a state of inaction. What could he do? Galimas and Marcaudier would laugh in his face if he went to demand Violette at their hands. Besides, the colonel had advised Robert to take no action in the matter until he heard from him. He had even promised that he should hear from him the next day, so there was nothing for Robert to do but wait.

The poor fellow passed a frightful night. He locked himself up in his room, and even forgot to ascertain if his groom had returned—the groom he thought he had seen hissing Violette in the upper gallery.

This strange incident recurred to his mind when he woke, however, and ringing for Jean, who promptly appeared in answer to the summons, wearing a decidedly shame-faced air, he proceeded to question him.

The youth denied the charge at first, but on being pressed, finally admitted that he had entered the theater on a ticket purchased at the door, and that he hissed because the piece bored him. This explanation did not satisfy his master, however, and Jean's discomfited mien showed plainly enough that his conscience was not clear; and when Robert announced his intention of sending him back to Rennes, he hung his head and wept, instead of protesting.

The morning passed quietly. Bechere had resolved not to go out for fear of missing M. de Mornac's visit, and on leaving the table, after going through the form of breakfasting, he went into the smoking-room and stretched himself out on a sofa to once more review the situation.

It seemed inextricable, and after racking his brain in vain to solve the mystery of Violette's disappearance, he began to think of his mother, and to wonder if he had not better join her at Rennes without delay. He had not received a letter from her for several days, and she might arrive in Paris at any moment; but why should he keep her waiting any longer, now that he had no hope of ever seeing Violette again? All his dreams of happiness had vanished, and he now began to think with something like regret of the quiet, uneventful life he had previously disdained.

He was engrossed with thoughts like these when a vigorous pull at the bell announced the arrival of the colonel, who was immediately ushered into the smoking-room, and who began as follows, without preamble of any kind:

"Last evening I promised to give my attention to the matter that interests you so deeply, and I have kept my word. I have just left police head-quarters, so I am now in a position to give you some definite information in regard to the persecutors of your lady-love, and in a quarter of an hour you will know as much about their past as I do. Galimas is a *parceau* in every sense of the word. Born

of poor but dishonest parents, he acquired his education at a public school, where he learned to read and write, and above all, to count. At sixteen years of age he was sweeping out a broker's office; at eighteen he was filling the responsible position of messenger; at twenty he was acting as clerk for another broker. Where he got the money that first enabled him to speculate on his own account the devil only knows. This much is certain: he is worth four or five millions to-day, which he has made dishonestly, of course, but without ever doing anything that would render him liable to prosecution by his victims. As for Marcaudier, his history is more complicated. It is closely connected with that of the ladies on the Rue du Rocher. The Malvoisine, as I think I have already told you, was at the head of a large dress-making establishment twenty-five years ago."

"Here in Paris?" asked Becherel.

"Yes, on the Rue Vivienne. She had a large and fashionable *clientèle* in those days, and was very handsome, though by no means virtuous. Among other male acquaintances she made that of a gentleman whose reputation was of a very doubtful kind, but whose wealth was incontestable, judging from the style in which he lived. This gentleman, who resided in Paris only at intervals, answered to the name of Morgan, and was the owner of a number of vessels, which he sometimes sailed himself. The fruit of his *liaison* with Josephine Lureau, now known as Madame de Malvoisine, was a daughter."

"Herminia?" exclaimed Becherel.

"The same, though she bore her mother's name until the day when the *modiste* after a long eclipse reappeared in Paris as the Countess de Malvoisine. That was about fifteen years ago, and everybody has forgotten Josephine Lureau now. The only traces that remain of her are on the archives of the prefecture."

"And Marcaudier, colonel?"

"I was just coming to him. This Morgan, who is Herminia's father, but who never acknowledged her—probably because he was a married man—reappeared in Paris at the same time, purchased a house for his daughter and her mother, and one for himself, and has since led a very retired life, absenting himself for months at a time, never showing himself at the house of the pretended countess, and indulging in no luxury or display, though he has a balance of at least twelve million francs in the Bank of France. He brought back to Paris with him a man who doesn't seem in the least inclined to bury himself, however, and who has made himself quite famous by some very successful speculations at the Bourse. This man is your usurer, Pierre Marcaudier, *alias* Cash on Delivery."

"Who is doubtless in the employ of Herminia's father—an atrocious scoundrel, apparently—and as that young lady took it into her head that she would like to marry me, Marcaudier invented a plan to get Violette out of the way in order to eventually bring me to the feet of his master's illegitimate daughter."

"That is exactly my opinion."

"But what has he done with her?"

"I am inclined to think that he entered into a compact with Galimas to entice her to some house where the gallant broker hides his lady-loves. My friend has promised to find this house, and in the meantime he has carried his courtesy so far as to place at my disposal two detectives who are now waiting for me in the street below. I was anxious to see you before I started out after Galimas, so—"

"But how about Marcaudier? Nobody can convince me that he was not the originator of the conspiracy; Galimas was only a tool."

"That is very possible: but even admitting you are right, we are not much better off. Where could Marcaudier have taken Violette? Certainly not to his own house in Passy?"

"I do not know."

"I do," said Jean, suddenly appearing before them.

It was a scene for a painter.

The groom had dropped the *portière* behind which he had been hiding, and now advanced tremblingly; M. de Mornac, furiously angry, made a movement as if to spring at his throat, exclaiming:

"So you have been listening again, you rascal? This is a little too much, and I'm going to give you a sound thrashing."

"Don't touch me," said the Breton, squaring himself for the encounter.

He was strong, like all his countrymen, and if the colonel had undertaken to correct him he would probably have had a lively time of it.

"It is to my master that I wish to speak, and to him alone," continued Jean.

"Well, speak then," said Becherel. "Vindicate yourself, if you can; but tell the truth. You will gain nothing by trying to deceive me. I have dismissed you, and I shall not take you into my service again."

"Monsieur did perfectly right to dismiss me. I deserved it; but I do not want to return home until monsieur has forgiven me."

"Forgiven you for what? For listening at doors?" retorted Robert, angrily. "Go and ask absolution of your father-confessor. He will give it if you have no other sins to reproach yourself with."

"What! you stand here and waste your time in talking with this fool, instead of kicking him out-of-doors? You can not wonder that I leave you in disgust."

"You will make a great mistake, then, sir," said Jean; "for I have several things to tell my master—things that you, too, ought to hear, for—"

"Explain quickly, then," interrupted Robert, glancing at the colonel as if to beg him to remain.

"About three weeks ago," began Jean, "I unintentionally overheard you talking of a lady who resides near here, on the Rue Rougemont—Madame Julia."

"Ah! so you are a lover of hers!" exclaimed M. de Mornac. "I might have known it."

"I was, but that is all over now. In the first place, she has another, and that doesn't suit me. Besides, after what she did yesterday—"

"Do you propose to entertain us with an account of your love affairs?" thundered M. de Mornac.

"Let him alone, colonel," said Becherel, who was beginning to see the drift of his groom's remarks.

Then, turning to Jean, he added:

"You went to the theater last night, you told me."

"Yes, monsieur," replied the youth, promptly; "and I was very sorry that I did, when I saw you there, seated behind the musicians. It was Madame Julia who gave me the ticket."

"And who ordered you to hiss, I suppose?"

"That is true; and I assure you I had no desire to; the young lady dressed like a bird was so pretty, and sung so sweetly. But Madame Julia motioned me to do it, and I didn't dare to disobey her. I was sorry for it afterward, though, for the men around me beat me and turned me out."

"And what then?"

"I had had enough of the theater, and would have been glad to return home, but Madame Julia had made me promise to wait for her in a *café* on the boulevard, so I waited."

"Did she come?"

"Yes; and she was in high spirits. She told me that it had been a hard matter to prevent the audience from breaking up everything in the theater. They were so mad because the singer couldn't be found. I said I was sorry to hear that, and she laughed and made fun of me. She

said that the young lady had taken her place, so she hated her, and was glad to get rid of her, and she added that the girl would never give her any more trouble, for she had been put in prison."

"In prison?" exclaimed Robert.

"Yes; and when I asked her what the poor young lady had done that she should have been arrested by the gendarmes she told me that I was a fool—that the gendarmes had had nothing to do with this affair—that it was a friend of hers who had carried the girl off."

"Did she tell you where he had taken her?"

"Yes; to a house that belongs to him, and where he intends to detain her by force. I thought it an abominable shame, but I didn't say so, because I wanted to find out if all this was really true; and when she had given me proofs that it was, I told her that she was a good-for-nothing hussy, and walked off and left her."

"But why did you say nothing about all this when I returned last night?"

"I didn't know that monsieur was acquainted with the young lady they had treated so badly. Still, the story I had heard worried me. I saw, too, that monsieur was in trouble; but I didn't dare to ask him what the matter was. But when I heard monsieur speak of the singer and how she had been kidnapped, I confess that I hid behind the curtain so as to hear more."

"I forgive you."

"I even thank you," added the colonel, "especially as you were shrewd enough to get some useful information out of the hussy. Was it to a house of the Rue Mozart that they took the young lady?"

"No; she told me the name of the street, but I don't remember it very well. It seems to me that it was something like Martin or Morton."

"The Rue Milton?" exclaimed Becherel.

"That is it."

"Why, it is there that Herminia's father lives," remarked the colonel.

"The mystery is solved!" cried Robert. "Morgan's house is connected by a garden with the house on the Rue Rodier, in which Marcaudier receives his clients. Jean, my boy, you have rendered me a service I shall never forget. Leave us now. I want to be alone with the colonel."

Jean disappeared, and Becherel immediately began to tell M. de Mornac all about his expedition of a fortnight before. M. de Mornac listened to the story with all the attention it deserved, but seemed to draw a rather startling conclusion from it, for he said, coldly:

"You certainly did very wrong to keep this adventure from me. If you had told me about it, we should not be where we are now."

"Yes; I did very wrong," replied Becherel, promptly; "but now you know all about it, I think you can not doubt that Violette has been taken to the place I speak of."

"I am not altogether sure of it, for this reason: if it was really Marcaudier that committed the outrage, there was no necessity of his associating Galimas with him in the affair. Besides, if it is really Violette's mother Marcaudier keeps shut up in his garret, he would commit a great imprudence by imprisoning the daughter there too."

"You forget that Marcaudier knows nothing of Violette's history, colonel. The Malvoisine and her daughter are equally ignorant of it, you recollect. They know that Violette was a foundling, but that is all."

"That is a sound argument, and we run no risk by acting on the supposition that you are right, and acting immediately. I have almost *carte blanche* from the prefecture. My two detectives are in the street below, and I have a carriage in waiting. We will enter it with them. I say we, because I am going to take you with me. You know the ground, and you may be of service to me."

"And we are going where?"

"To the Rue Milton, of course. But, after we get there, you must let me operate alone. I don't know how I shall manage it, but I assure you that I shall succeed in getting into the house some way or other. Are you ready?"

It is needless to say that Robert did not keep the colonel waiting, even for a moment, and the whole party were soon driving rapidly in the direction of the Rue Milton. It was not until they had gone a short distance beyond the suspected house that the colonel ordered the coachman to stop.

They all alighted, but the detectives remained near the carriage, while M. de Mornac and Becherel proceeded toward the house.

"I'll give you my instructions now," remarked the colonel. "Morgan has been away, but I am sure he has returned, for all the shutters are open, as you see. You are to wait for me on the other side of the street, directly opposite the house, and not move until you receive further orders from me."

"What, colonel, you are going into the house alone?"

"Yes; if I need you I will call you."

"But this Morgan must be a scoundrel of the deepest dye, and his servants are probably no better than he is, so you run no little risk of personal violence."

"I'm not afraid of that. I have a good revolver in my pocket. Besides, I have taken my precautions, and at the very first signal from me the detectives will rush to my aid. The signal is to be a pistol-shot."

"But they may not hear it. They are so far off."

"But you will, and you can call them. It will not be necessary, however. I know how I can keep Monsieur Morgan on his good behavior."

"And you think he will see you?"

"I am sure of it, and he will listen to me, too. I haven't time now to explain how I intend to proceed, but you surely have sufficient confidence in me to allow me to be guided by my own judgment."

And, without giving Becherel time to make any more objections, M. de Mornac crossed the street and gave the door-bell of Morgan's house a vigorous pull.

The servant who answered the summons was in his shirt-sleeves, and had a feather duster in his hand. His appearance was by no means prepossessing, and it was in a rough almost insolent manner that he said, gruffly:

"Who do you want to see?"

"Monsieur Leon Morgan," replied the colonel.

"My master is not seeing any one to-day."

"He will see me, however. Tell him that I have called at the instance of Monsieur Pierre Marcaudier, to see him on a matter of grave importance."

The servant hesitated. In fact he seemed to be on the point of shutting the door in the visitor's face, when a harsh voice cried from the end of the hall:

"Let him in!"

Colonel Mornac pushed by the servant, and found himself face to face with a man whom he recognized as Morgan from the description that had been given of him at the prefecture of police.

The man was tall and stout, with very broad shoulders. He had a brick-red face, closely cropped gray hair, and shaggy eyebrows. He looked like a sailor, or rather like a pirate. His eyes were sharp, and his face stern and even forbidding in its expression, though his features were regular, and he must even have been quite handsome when he was young.

He wore a loose blouse that exposed his neck to view—a thick, bull-like neck, and had a short black pipe in his mouth.

"Did you say that you called at Pierre Marcaudier's request?" he asked, brusquely.

"Yes, Monsieur Leon."

"How did he hear that I was in the city? I arrived only this morning, and I wrote him that I should not return until to-morrow."

"That is true, but he bade me call at all hazards. I want to speak to you on an important matter. He will call himself this evening."

"Very well; step out into the garden with me."

This proposal was eminently satisfactory for many reasons. An interview in a room would have had its dangers; in the open air the colonel ran little if any risk.

So he followed Morgan, who finally paused in the middle of a path some distance from the house, and said, bluntly:

"We are alone now. What do you want with me? But, first, tell me who you are. I don't know you."

"But Pierre Marcaudier knows me."

"That is very possible; but what is your name?"

"My name would have no significance to you. It is enough for you to know that I was sent here by the prefect of police."

"A detective! *Mille tonnerres!* We'll see about this. Jean Marie!" shouted Morgan, at the top of his voice.

But before the servant he summoned had time to respond to the call, the colonel drew a revolver from his pocket, and said, coolly:

"If you do not send your servant back, I shall fire in the air, and the policemen who are waiting for me in the Rue Milton will rush in."

The threat proved effectual, for Jean Marie had scarcely shown his face in the door-way, when his master cried:

"Remain in the hall, and don't let any one in."

"That order is entirely useless," remarked M. de Mornac, coolly. "If I summon my men, they will burst the door open if necessary. It will be greatly to your interest, however, to create no scandal, for I have merely come to ask an explanation of a certain fact. If this explanation appears satisfactory to me, you will be subjected to no further annoyance."

Morgan's face just at that moment was a curious study. He was evidently trying to decide whether he should spring

upon the colonel and strangle him with his brawny hands or bear him to the end. He would not have hesitated, probably, if he had had a clear conscience.

"I have never had any dealings with the police," he said, at last. "I was formerly a large shipowner; I am worth fifteen million francs, and I made my money honestly."

"I know who you are," interrupted M. de Mornac; "and I also know that since you took up your abode in Paris, about fifteen years ago, your life has been irreproachable. I can not say as much, however, of the man you honor with your confidence, for frequent complaints have been made to us of Marcaudier's usurious practices."

"That is no concern of mine. Pierre sailed with me years ago; he has had an interest in some of my commercial enterprises, and in that way has made a great deal of money. What he does with it is no business of mine. It is hardly probable that you came here to talk to me about these matters, so tell me just what you want and have done with it."

"Very well. A complaint has been made against you, and the investigation of the charge has been intrusted to me. You are accused of unwarrantable and forcible detention."

"Detention!" repeated Morgan, in the tone of a man who did not comprehend the meaning of the word. "What do you mean?"

"In other words, you are accused of having imprisoned a person against that person's will, and of detaining the person by force; and you are doubtless aware that the law severely punishes any outrage of individual liberty."

"Who accuses me of this?"

"Neighbors, who complain of being annoyed by the cries of that person, who, they say, is so continually shrieking and screaming for help that they are unable to sleep at night."

"I have no neighbors, and there is no sense in the complaint. Those who made it must have some object in thus endeavoring to injure me, and their charge is utterly unworthy of credence. You can search my house from top to bottom, however, if you like. I will show you through it myself."

The pretended agent from the prefecture was silent for a moment, but he did not seem to be convinced.

"Pardon me," he said, at last, "but doesn't that house I see at the further end of the garden belong to your friend, Monsieur Marcaudier?"

"I am really unable to say."

"We are not, however. And it is from that very house that the cries and moans proceed."

"Then apply to the owner of it for the information you desire."

"We shall be obliged to do that eventually, I do not doubt; but in the meantime will you allow me to broach another side of the question? The information we have received is full and explicit. We are sure that some one is confined in that building, and a warrant for an examination of the premises will soon be issued—probably to-morrow, and the result will doubtless be extremely unpleasant for Monsieur Marcaudier. If he were the only person concerned in the matter this search-warrant would have been issued long ago, for he does not bear a very enviable reputation with us; but he is an intimate friend of yours, and it is well to think twice before involving a person like yourself in such an affair."

"I am extremely grateful to you, I am sure," said Morgan, with an ironical grimace; "but pray finish what you have to say."

"If you know the truth I assure you that it would be greatly to your interest to tell it before any further action is taken in the matter. I should add that we are perfectly willing to admit that there may be no real crime at the

bottom of all this: that is, in the ordinary sense of the world. Forcible detention is considered a grave offense, particularly when it is practiced upon an individual whose existence troubles the person committing the offense; for example, when the victim is a person who has a right to property that is in the possession of the offender; but there are circumstances which render such an act almost pardonable. Suppose, for instance, that some member of a family should be afflicted with insanity. That is a great disadvantage, and, in fact, a positive affliction to children, and even near relatives. When one belongs to such a family marriage becomes difficult and sometimes impossible; so not a few persons endeavor to conceal the disgrace, and instead of sending their afflicted relative to an insane asylum they keep the victim in their own custody, and sedulously conceal the fact from their friends and acquaintances. This is very wrong, certainly, but after all it is natural, for we are none of us perfect."

"No; and there are many more scoundrels than honest men, in my opinion. But what are you driving at?"

"I want to say to you—I am authorized by the prefect of police to say to you—that if the person forcibly detained there is an insane person and has been confined there for the reasons I have cited, it would change the aspect of affairs entirely. The motives that led to the detention would be considered, and if it could be proved that it had not been done in the interest of an avaricious relative, no prosecution would ensue, but the authorities would confine themselves to ordering the transfer of the demented person to a private lunatic asylum."

"That is your private opinion, I suppose?"

"No; it is the opinion of my superiors; and they would not only carefully refrain from making the matter public, but would assume the whole responsibility—as they have an undoubted right to do."

Morgan did not utter a word. He seemed to be reflecting.

"I tell you all this, sir," continued M. de Mornac, "because the affair is sure to create a great scandal if the authorities should be compelled to resort to legal measures. Of course all this would affect you more or less directly, as Marcaudier is a protégé of yours, and if he be arrested your reputation would suffer."

"You are right," said Morgan, brusquely. "I had better tell you all."

"I congratulate you on your decision, sir; and I assure you that you will have no cause to regret having followed my advice."

"Ah, well! the woman up there is mad, and has been mad for fifteen years."

"It is a woman, then," said M. de Mornac, who was perfectly well aware of the fact, but who had taken good care not to mention the sex of the prisoner.

"Yes, my wife. You see I am concealing nothing from you. I married her in America. She brought me no fortune, so I have no interest in getting her out of the way. Her mind became affected while we were living in Havre. I had ceased to follow the sea and was contemplating a change of residence. She had not lost her reason entirely at that time; but her malady seemed to be making such rapid progress that I thought strongly of placing the unfortunate woman in an insane asylum; but Marcaudier dissuaded me from doing so and offered to take charge of her himself. I made a great mistake in following his advice, and have often regretted it since."

"May I inquire if Madame de Malvoisine knows of this affair?"

"So you know—"

"Yes; I am perfectly aware of your former relations with her, and also that the fruit of your *liaison* was a daughter whom you have not acknowledged in order that you might be able to leave her your entire fortune."

"I do not deny it."

"Then you have had no legitimate children, I suppose?"

Morgan turned pale, but he had resolved to keep nothing back.

"Yes: my wife bore me a daughter," he replied, "but she was stolen from me."

"Who stole her from you?" inquired the colonel, hastily, greatly surprised by this confession.

"I have no idea. I was in America at the time. It was in consequence of this calamity that my wife became insane."

"But did you make no effort to find your child?"

"It would have been useless. Marcaudier ascertained for a certainty that she was dead. The persons who stole her embarked on a small vessel with the intention of taking her to England. The vessel was run down in the middle of the Channel by a large ship and every soul on board was lost."

"So it was Marcaudier who—"

"I loved the child very much, and grieved a great deal over her loss: but of course I got used to it after awhile. And it was all for the best that she died, perhaps, for my life has been a hell ever since my marriage. My wife found out about Madame de Malvoisine and was continually making scenes. I live in peace now; but I am not much happier."

"I should think that Mademoiselle Herminia—"

"Herminia has no heart; and her mother has brought her up very badly. She is about to be married, Marcaudier writes me, and I am glad of it. I shall give her a large dowry, and she will inherit my property. I am thinking strongly of going to sea again, and I shall die as I have lived—a sailor. I have told you all. Have you any more questions to ask?"

"But one. I shall be obliged to report to the prefect; and as I can not do that upon mere hearsay, I must see—"

"My wife. You can do so if you like. I haven't seen

her myself since she's been up there; but I have the key to the garret where Marcaudier keeps her. It is in my secretary; I'll go and get it."

He re-entered the house, but the colonel remained in the garden. He was satisfied now that Morgan's statements were true, and that he was not such a great criminal after all. That he had formerly been engaged in the slave-trade —that he had even been a pirate—was more than probable; that he made his wife's life very unhappy was certain; but there was nothing to prove that he told an untruth when he said that he had placed his wife in confinement because she was insane. And it was equally probable that he was sincere in asserting that his daughter had been stolen in his absence, and that he had deeply mourned her loss.

Besides, however this might be, he was certainly ignorant that the daughter he supposed dead was imprisoned with her mother in Marcaudier's garret; and the colonel, who had previously regarded him as the chief culprit and the prime cause of Violette's misfortunes, now saw in him an unscrupulous man and cruel husband, but not an unnatural father. The real culprit was Marcaudier, Mme. de Malvoisine's accomplice, and Morgan's treacherous counselor, the inhuman custodian of the poor insane woman, the cowardly wretch who had just condemned Violette to the same horrible fate as her mother, and that certainly without Morgan's knowledge or consent.

In a few moments Morgan reappeared with a key in his hand.

"I will satisfy you now, sir," he said, coldly; "and I trust to your honor to render a truthful and impartial version of the facts to those who sent you here. You have only to follow me. I know where the room is and the way to it though I have never entered it."

"What! never?" exclaimed Mornac.

"No; Marcaudier is the only person that visits the room. He goes there every evening whether I am in Paris or not

—to take the unfortunate woman food: and I assure you that she has never wanted for anything so far as I know."

"It seems to me, however, that a man is hardly the person to wait upon a—a sick lady."

"Oh, Marcaudier is a sort of general utility man. I can trust him: and he has often assured me that my wife never complained of her surroundings or fate."

"But how about these cries that the neighbors hear?"

"Oh, she shrieks and raves when fits of frenzy seize her—which is generally at night, unfortunately. But at other times she is very quiet."

"One question more, sir. If she had died in her prison-house what would you have done?"

Morgan seemed a trifle disconcerted, but he replied, with much hesitation:

"I confess that I never thought what I should do in such a case."

"Would you have made her death public? Hardly, for it would have been necessary for you to admit at the same time how she had been living for fifteen years, and who she was."

"I could not have done it even if I had wanted to, for when I brought my wife here on my return from a voyage to America I told people that she had died in New York."

"So everybody supposed that you were a widower. Consequently you would have been obliged to bury her secretly in the garden, probably."

"I don't know. Marcaudier would have attended to that."

"I don't doubt it; but see the situation in which this would have placed you. You might even have been accused of murder. I tell you this to show you that you have acted very wisely in putting an end to a state of affairs which was certainly fraught with serious danger to you."

"Nothing would please me better, I am sure," said

Morgan, "but how? What are you going to do with my wife? I can not live with her any longer."

"You must place her in an asylum, where your fortune will enable you to give her every possible comfort. No explanation of the past will be required of you when you take her there; and this reappearance or resurrection of your lawful wife will make very little change in your life, for you have no idea of marrying Madame de Malvoisine, I suppose?"

"Oh, no. Marcaudier has urged me to do so several times, but I have never given him any encouragement. I've had enough of married life, and of the countess. I have made my will. Herminia will inherit all my property. She is my daughter, after all. If the other one had lived—"

"What other one?"

"The one who was stolen from me!"

"Well, what then?" inquired M. de Mornac, eagerly.

"If the other one had lived Herminia would not have had my fortune, and it would have been a good thing, for she isn't worthy of it. I should have left her plenty to live upon, however; and as her mother is very well off she might have succeeded in capturing a marquis after all, and that is the height of her ambition."

These remarks dispelled the colonel's last lingering doubts. The real culprit was certainly Marcaudier.

So there was nothing to prevent Violette from becoming a wealthy heiress! But at what a price! The father who stood ready to acknowledge her as his child was certainly not a parent to be proud of, and M. de Mornac found it difficult indeed to believe that she was the daughter of such a man, and even the half-sister of a girl who was so utterly unlike her.

"Come, sir," said Morgan; "come, I beg of you, and let us have it over with."

They walked toward the building at the other end of the

garden, and the colonel then followed his companion up a winding staircase that led to a massive door.

"This is the place," remarked his guide. "I will open the door for you, but I don't care to go in. You can make your investigation without my assistance."

"I would rather you accompanied me," replied the colonel, who had his reasons for not wishing to appear before the two prisoners alone.

"As you please."

Morgan looked for the lock, and as it was rather dark in the passage he had considerable difficulty in finding it. He succeeded at last. The key he inserted was so rusty that it did not enter the lock very easily, and when he tried to turn it it resisted his efforts—a fact which proved beyond a doubt that he had rarely or never made use of this key. Marcaudier had his own, and Marcaudier came every day.

The lock finally yielded to the pressure exerted upon it, and the door opened; but instead of entering Morgan hastily recoiled, for his wife, who had been attracted thither by the noise, suddenly appeared before him, changed almost beyond recognition by the frightful sufferings and privations through which she had passed. He recognized her, however, and she knew him, for she cried:

"Wretch! you have come to kill me at last."

"No, no," faltered Morgan.

"Ah, well, then kill your daughter too," replied the unfortunate woman, pushing Violette forward.

"My daughter!" repeated Morgan in profound astonishment.

"Yes, my daughter Simone, whom you stole from me, but whom God has restored to me! Look at her! do you see the birth-mark on her shoulder? Do you dare to deny that it is she?"

The colonel had kept a little in the background, and the prisoners had not perceived his presence; but when he did

step forward Violette threw herself in his arms, crying wildly:

"Save me! Save me!"

She might have added: "from my mother," for she had no idea that the man who had entered first was her father, and it was the insane woman that so terrified her.

Morgan devoured his daughter with his eyes, and undoubtedly recognized her, for he stepped toward her and offered her his hand. Seeing her draw back with a gesture of surprise and aversion, he said, curtly:

"Very well. I know what I have to do. Sir, I ask you to grant me a quarter of an hour—time to repair the wrong I have done."

And without waiting for a reply he rushed down-stairs, leaving the colonel alone with the mother and daughter.

The demented woman had regained just enough reason to realize the terrible wrong that had been done her, and she began to shower the fiercest imprecations upon her persecutors, while Violette briefly related her strange adventures to M. de Mornac.

The way was clear now, and there was nothing to prevent the colonel from taking the prisoners from the dungeon in which Marcaudier had confined them. He rather shrunk from the idea of taking them out into the street and putting them in the carriage dressed as they were, but it would not do to leave them here, for Morgan might change his mind.

"Come," he said to them, motioning Violette to support her mother upon one side while he sustained her on the other.

The unfortunate woman offered no resistance, and they descended the stairs three abreast; but when they reached the garden the light dazzled her, and her strength seemed to fail her, so they were obliged to seat her upon a bench.

She was perfectly quiet now. The excitement caused by Morgan's unexpected visit had given place to a deep torpor.

"Where is Robert?" inquired Violette, as she seated herself beside her mother.

"He is waiting for me a few steps from here. Have you the courage to take your mother home with you in her present condition?"

"I will not leave her again. But that man—"

"That man is less culpable than you suppose. Besides—he is your father."

Violette burst into tears.

"Do you not think with me that it would be better to forget the wrong he has done your mother?"

"Alas, yes."

"Then you will consent to abandon all idea of avenging your mother. I approve your decision; but it is not necessary that he should see you again, and if you are not afraid to remain here by yourself for a few moments I will let him know your decision—and mine."

Violette nodded her assent, and M. de Mornac walked straight into the house.

He met no one in the hall, and seeing an open door he entered a room that seemed to be the private office of the master of the house; but that gentleman was not there.

He was about to call him, when a voice cried:

"One minute more and I will be at your service."

The sound came from an adjoining room, which was separated from the office by a rich curtain, purchased probably by Morgan on one of his voyages to the far East.

M. de Mornac thought he might surely grant a few moments to this repentant father, so he walked to a window that looked out upon the garden in which the mother and daughter were sitting side by side.

"Here I am, sir," said Morgan, entering the room, with a large envelope in his hand. "Will you be kind enough to give this envelope to the person to whom it is addressed? It contains the certificate of my daughter's birth, and a full description of her, authenticated by the testimony of

witnesses, and recorded in the city clerk's office at Havre, shortly after her disappearance, and before I had received the false intelligence of her death. With these documents she will have no difficulty in establishing her rights; besides, they will not be contested, for I have just burned my will. I have also inclosed in the envelope the certificate of my marriage with her mother. Simone Morgan is my legitimate child, my only child, and consequently the sole heiress to all my property."

"You have certainly done the handsome thing, monsieur," said the colonel, surprised and touched. "Do you desire to see her again?"

"See her again! No, it would only pain her."

"She is in the garden."

"Then I can certainly take one more look at my child."

He gazed at her in silence for some time, and the colonel, who was watching him, saw two big tears roll down his swarthy cheeks.

His emotion transfigured the face of the old corsair, and the colonel saw now that he must really have been quite handsome in his youth.

"She would have loved me," muttered Morgan. "My life has been a failure, and it is too late to begin it over again. Farewell, sir," he continued, turning from the window. "I bear you no ill-will. You have really done me a service, and I rely upon you to prevent this affair from becoming noised about. I take no interest in Marcaudier, and if you deliver him up to justice you will be doing perfectly right. I really think, however, that it would be better to let him go and get hung elsewhere."

"That is my opinion, and—"

"Tell my daughter that I implore her to forgive me, and pray for me."

With these concluding words Morgan disappeared behind the curtain, and the colonel dared not follow him, though he foresaw the possibility of a tragical *denouement*.

Putting the envelope in his pocket, he passed out into the hall, but he had not descended three stairs when he heard the report of a pistol.

"Ah!" he said to himself, with a *sang-froid* Robert de Beherel would certainly have envied, "I thought it would end in that way. He has killed himself, and it is a good thing I guess. He had the right sort of stuff in him, after all. You wouldn't catch that cur Marcaudier doing the same."

He saw nothing of the valet when he reached the hall below, so instead of going out into the garden he opened the door that led into the street.

Robert was awaiting him there.

"Violette is found," said the colonel, "and her mother, too. Don't ask me any questions now, but tell the coachman to drive up to the door. Send the officers away, and tell them I will be at the prefecture in an hour. Get up on the box beside the driver. I am going to take Violette home, and I don't want her to see you. I won't have any explanations and lover's transports in the street, nor would it be well for the crazy woman to see you. We should only have a scene."

Beherel obeyed without even a protest, and everything passed off as the colonel desired.

He had certainly done a good morning's work, this intrepid colonel! Thanks to his efforts, Violette was saved, and Robert was troubled with no further fears of losing her. There was nothing for them to do now but be happy.

EPILOGUE.

A YEAR has passed, and Paris has forgotten the story, though it must be admitted that it knew only a portion of the facts.

Violette's disappearance in the middle of a performance

at the Fantasies Lyriques created a great stir, and the papers talked of nothing else for a week; but nobody suspected the truth. Everybody attributed it to some love affair or a pretty woman's caprice.

Poor Cochard was the greatest sufferer, but Violette, on finding herself the possessor of immense wealth, indemnified him in the most liberal manner for the pecuniary loss the sudden closing of his theater had caused him.

Herminia and her mother heard of Morgan's death and his daughter's reappearance at the same time.

Their feelings on learning that Morgan had destroyed his will before he killed himself may be better imagined than described.

The investigation made by M. de Mornac, after Morgan's tragical death, told him all he cared to know about the infamous scoundrel whom Morgan had enriched, but who had been his evil genius.

Devoted to Josephine Lureau, who was not then a countess, Marcaudier had taken advantage of his benefactor's absence to kidnap Simone, with the assistance of Rembriche, whom he had afterward rewarded by taking into his service. It was Rembriche who had taken the child to Rennes, and left her on a public promenade in that city; and Marcaudier had taken advantage of the distress of mind into which this misfortune had plunged Morgan to induce him to deprive his poor, partially demented wife of her freedom. He had offered to take charge of her, and Heaven only knows the sufferings and privations he had imposed upon her!

This in itself would have more than sufficed to insure his arrest and subsequent imprisonment, but M. de Mornac, after a consultation with his friend at the prefecture, decided not to seek any legal redress on account of Violette, who would be obliged to testify before the court that tried her mother's persecutor; but the wretch, on finding that his guilt had been discovered and that he was likely to be

arrested at any moment, fled from the country as rapidly as steam would take him, and is now carrying on his old business of usury in England. He may prosper on the other side of the Channel, but in France no one regrets him, not even Julia Pannetier, who has found consolation in the devotion of Florimond, the handsome tenor of the Fantasies Lyriques.

But though the gallant colonel had accomplished wonders, he had a far more difficult task to perform.

He was now of the opinion that his young friend should marry Violette, but how was Mme. de Becherel to be induced to consent to his son's marriage with the daughter of an insane woman and a former slave-trader?

Morgan had died without leaving any trace, so to speak. He was scarcely known in France, and the origin of his wealth was already forgotten. But the mother was living, and there was no hope of her recovery. Indeed, after a few days of comparative sanity, her condition became so much worse that it was necessary to place her in a private insane asylum.

But God, in His infinite mercy, granted this poor suffering soul rest at last, and about a month afterward she died peacefully and quietly in Simone's arms.

Violette's past remained a past irreproachable, so far as conduct was concerned, but marred by a single brief appearance on the boards of a Parisian theater. Immense importance is attached to such crimes as this, in the provinces, and a woman is regarded with suspicion merely from the fact that she has been an actress, if only for a single day. It is needless to say that Mme. de Becherel fully agreed with her most bigoted compatriots in this matter.

The colonel adopted a very sensible plan. He went to Rennes, and instead of making a direct appeal to Mme. de Becherel, went straight to the superior of the Convent of the Visitation. That venerable lady, who retained a very

favorable recollection of her former protégé, admitted the justice of the colonel's arguments, and finally consented to serve as an intermediary between him and Robert's mother. It would be almost too much to say that Mlle. Morgan's millions did not influence Mme. de Becherel somewhat in her decision—for in Brittany the power of money is universally conceded—but if Violette had had fifty millions and a blemish on her past, she would never have married the last scion of one of the oldest families in Brittany with his mother's consent.

Violette and Robert were married in Paris the following autumn, and spent the winter in Rennes, where everybody petted and made much of the beautiful bride.

They are rebuilding the old château of the Becherels in the Prevalaye, and the newly married pair will reside there. Jean has been promoted to the dignity of *valet-de-chambre*, and tells all the country youths of his acquaintance that Paris girls are deceitful hussies.

Herminia, they say, is about to marry a gentleman who has just spent all the money he had left in purchasing a foreign title, so she seems likely to be a countess—like her mother.

The colonel has resumed his former habits. He rides every day, and dances attendance upon all the handsome widows of his acquaintance; but he has agreed to spend two months of every summer with his young friends, and whenever he meets Robert in Paris, where the newly married couple go quite often, he never fails to say to him:

"You still owe me satisfaction, recollect. You must be prepared to receive a visit from my seconds at any time."

THE END.